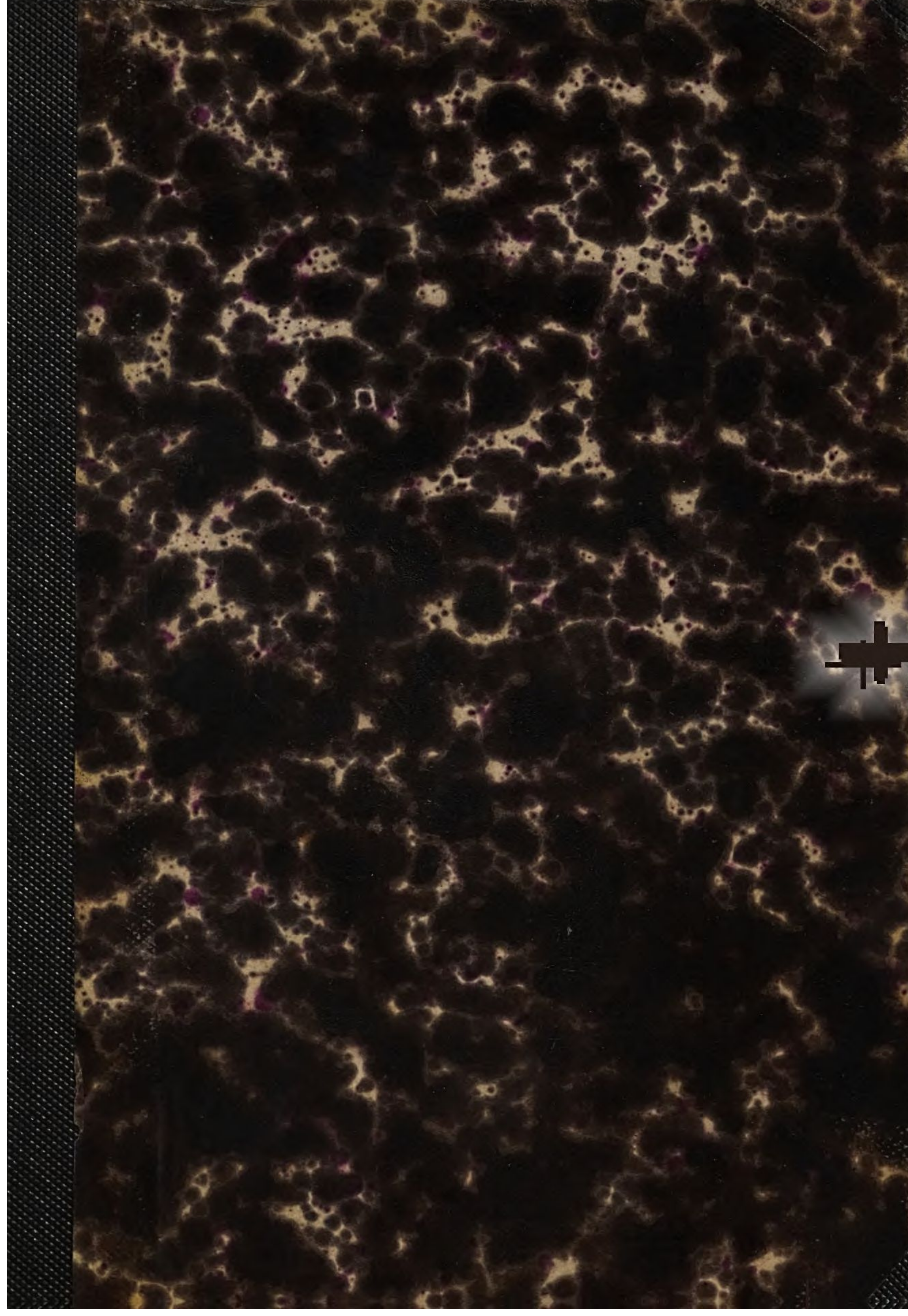




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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

HOWARD CONSCIENCE

CHAPTER

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COWARD CONSCIENCE!

BY

F. W. ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "LITTLE KATE KIRBY,"
"POOR ZEPH," &c.

"O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!"
SHAKSPERE.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

HAMBURG.

KARL GRÄDENER.

1879.

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COWARD CONSCIENCE!

F. W. ROBINSON



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BOOK I.

“THE END OF THE FIRST ACT.”

CONRAD CORSELY

BOOK I

THE END OF THE FIRST ACT

COWARD CONSCIENCE!

CHAPTER I.

THE PASSENGERS BY THE WITCH.

IT was one in the early morning of a bleak day in March that the English screw-steamer "The Witch," Captain Evans commanding, floundered out of the old harbour of Honfleur into the black sea beyond its bar. It was a cold; wild morning, even for March, and there was dirty weather at sea, as there had been, for that matter, for days and days before this one on which our story opens. The Witch took out from Honfleur two passengers for England—only two with courage to face the dirty weather aforesaid, or who, courage or no courage, had been driven, by necessity or inclination, to leave fair France for merry England, at that uncomfortable hour. These two travellers, man and woman, strangers to each other, and who had never met before in the whole term of their young lives, jostled against each other on the landing-stage, and in the darkness, as they crept cautiously from

Norman ground to the deck of the English steamer, followed by two sailors bearing, with great ease and independence, their respective luggage—the lady's a black morocco bag, the gentleman's a small portmanteau, as scarred and weather-beaten as the cliff of Notre Dame de Grace, hiding in the night above the town there. The shadows were too deep and thick to betray much of the strangers' identity, but they were both evidently young, unless their figures did them more than justice in the darkness. The passengers duly delivered—regarded perhaps a little curiously by some passengers of equine nature standing head to tail on deck, in a rank of half-a-dozen—the ropes were loosed and let adrift, and the Witch staggered out to sea, a lantern or two dancing at them for awhile from shore, and the lighthouse taking a long, last bright stare at them.

Man and woman settled down to their places without any heed to each other, and at a long distance apart from each other, black shadows looming amidst many shadows of masts and cordage, and burly seamen's forms. Presently, a second woman, without cap or bonnet, as if in fair summer-weather trim, rose as from a trap upon the scene.

"Will not madam step into the cabin?" asked the stewardess, anxious for the comfort of the sole client she was likely to have that voyage.

The voice was very young and sweet,—and heaven knows, very sad, that answered her.

"Not yet, please; I like the sea breeze," she said apologetically.

"You will find it very cold out here."

"Yes, I know," she replied, half absently, and yet half hurriedly, like one who would get rid of her companion as quickly as possible. "It will be cold, of course. I will come down shortly." The stewardess withdrew, looking askance at traveller No. 2, as she passed him.

"Rough weather, stewardess," he said.

"It has been rough all the week. I don't know when we are likely to have fine weather again," complained the stewardess.

"Patience, and you'll get it in good time," he responded with a laugh.

"Well, I hope so."

"I have been waiting for fine weather these five years, and I'm not tired out."

"Good luck, perhaps you mean?" said the stewardess, who was quick-witted in her way, and whose eyes were sharp enough even in the darkness to see that this male passenger by the Witch was not one of fortune's favourites: that is, if a seedy attire be any test of disreputability in crossing from France to England.

"Yes, I meant good luck, I suppose," he said.

"You suppose?" repeated the stewardess.

"One does not know always what one means," he said, more to himself than to the buxom woman standing before him, arms akimbo, hard up for business, and with all her basins in ghastly unemployed stacks below stairs.

"Has the good luck come, sir?" asked she, curiously.

"It's coming," he answered, drily.

She went away after this. She would have been glad of a longer chat with a human and rational fellow-creature, even in the wind and cold, but his manner was no more inviting than the lady's now. He was anxious to be rid of her, and to confine himself to his own train of thought, whatever that might be. When the stewardess had departed, he drew a short clay pipe from the breast-pocket of his thin overcoat, and proceeded to fill and ignite it, glancing across at his fellow-passenger as if half-disposed to inquire if she objected to smoking, and then possibly considering that it was a superfluous question, as he had made up his mind to smoke, and the lady could get clear of his tobacco when she wished. She had no business on deck at that unnatural hour, to begin with; she would be better downstairs, tucked up snugly in one of the berths till morning. She was young and gentle and delicate, not a being who had knocked about the world and roughed it everywhere, as he had. He was roughing it now, and he knew it would do him no harm, and that it was his natural condition, for that matter, to feel cold and uncomfortable—but why the deuce the girl sat, rigid and thoughtful, and staring towards Honfleur, which had long ago sunk away into the night, he could not conjecture. He was not a curious man—that is, he had never thought

he was a curious man until that hour, but he would have been glad to learn what kind of history it was, and even what sorrow or trouble it was, that had set that young woman there, as lonely a figure in the world as he.

He was sure it was a sorrow or a trouble, for she was crying; he had heard even a sob escape her, and he knew that a white handkerchief was held up to the eyes, though the face was turned away from him and towards the French coast, from which they had departed. Leaving school; leaving a lover; leaving home, perhaps; going out into the world for the first time, as he had gone years ago, and, perhaps, with his old bitterness of spirit. Still, there were hundreds of reasons why women should shed tears—and they weep without a reason very often, too—why in the name of all that's absurd and foolish should he harass himself by speculating as to the antecedents of that girl? By Jove, he had enough antecedents of his own without being imaginative as to other people's. Let him take a turn or two along the deck, and get some little warmth into him, and some foolish thoughts out of him. He could not sit there and freeze with equanimity, as the lady seemed capable of doing. He sprang to his feet, and paced the deck with long strides, the sparks from his pipe whirling past in the darkness.

He went the full length of the vessel, looked at the horses, and asked a few questions of a

man in charge of them; he had been interested in horses once, had a horse or two of his own for that matter, and he expressed it frankly, as his opinion, that it was a fool's task to ship horses in such weather from one country to another. He exchanged a word or two with the sailors, who had put on a surly mood along with their sou-westerners, and were not particularly disposed to be conversational. He discovered the cook making tea, in a little snugger on the middle-deck, and fraternised with him, as with a being to be studied under such circumstances, and took tea with him, for a slight consideration, out of a cracked blue mug.

Then the girl came to his mind again. Wouldn't hot tea do her good, and put some warmth into her? Wouldn't she be grateful for this steaming, strong-flavoured, but acceptable Bohea, or would she think it a liberty of his to suggest such a thing, an excuse to force himself upon her company, a cad's trick—what a commercial traveller, or a sneaking bagman would do, with a leer on his face at his own infernal officiousness? No; he would leave that attention to the stewardess, whom he would be robbing of her perquisites otherwise. He was always a robber. He remembered the time, God help him, when his own father had called him a thief. Ever before him that awful, strongly-marked time—red as blood!

He would see how his fellow-passenger was getting on, though, and he left the cook's cuddy,

and went back along the deck in search of her, thinking once more, and this time in half-soliloquy:

"What can she want out on such a night as this? Why has she chosen this rough way of getting to English ground?"

She was still in her old place; she had not moved from her seat at the ship's side; and there was a suspicion of rain in the air, unless it was a drift of sea spray that came cold and wet against his face. By all that was mysterious, this was a singular young woman.

He passed close to her without her heeding him; he glanced down at her, and saw that she had fallen asleep at last—a woman tired out as with a long journey. He stopped at once, stooped and touched her lightly on the arm, waking her with a start.

He raised his shabby felt hat, with the quick instinct of a gentleman, and said:

"I beg your pardon—but you had fallen asleep, and the night air is dangerous."

"I don't think I was asleep," said the lady softly in return, and with the true feminine instinct not to acknowledge it, at any rate.

"Oh yes, you were," was the blunt contradiction given, "and you will catch cold if you stay out here any longer."

She glanced up at him, and rose obediently at his hint to withdraw.

"I think you are right," she said in a low tone.

The deck was not clear of stray ropes, and the ship swayed vigorously in the wind; as she went towards the lady's cabin, she tripped slightly in the gloom. Her fellow-passenger was at her side again. He had been watching her attentively.

"Will you lean upon my arm for a moment? It is rough walking here."

"Thank you," she replied, but she continued her progress without availing herself of his escort, until a lurch of the ship brought her against him with a somewhat unceremonious bump.

"You'll find it more convenient to take my arm," he said coolly, and at this second invitation, she thanked him by a movement of her head, and took it.

"You are not used to sea journeys?" he remarked.

"It is a new experience to me," was the reply, which came slowly, and after a moment's consideration as to the method of her answer.

"Unless business is very pressing, the daylight route, as they say in the advertisements, is infinitely to be preferred," said the gentleman.

"Probably, but I *am* in haste. I—" and then the lady stopped and said no more. It might have suggested itself to her that the stranger was leading her on, or that she was growing too communicative—at all events she came to a full stop. The gentleman did not notice this, or affected not to do so. He went on with vo-

lubility, and in a manner that showed he was perfectly at his ease with her.

"Or, as in my case, when a man is poor and shabby, and then the night passage is an advantage. 'Needs must,' sometimes!" he added.

"I have come this way to save a few shillings myself," was the frank statement in return.

"I am sorry to hear it," he said quickly; "but here are the cabin stairs: mind how you go down them, and stick fast to the hand-rail. Good night!"

He did not wait for her response; he left her quickly, and began his perambulations of the deck once more. She was soon out of his sight, but not out of his mind all the long, dark cold hours before dawn. It was very odd why this young lady should perplex him in this way; he who had enough on his mind to distract or employ it, without this unnecessary supplement—he who all his life had had a wondrous faculty for minding his own business, and troubling himself, perhaps too little even, with the business of other folk. Ah! if he had attended to that long ago—kept an eye upon the bad and bitter business of men and women who were working against him, directly and indirectly, he would not have been the seedy individual he was, or engaged on the mission which lay before him. Perhaps they were right, and he was an easy-going ne'er-do-weel, without a thought for the morrow. At all events there were many to believe it was his character. But he was thinking

of the morrow then—that is, of the daylight which he might term to-morrow, and how the lady passenger would look, and whether, on the strength of their past conversation, he might venture to speak to her again. And how he should look in particular, with the sun upon him and his threadbare suit proclaiming to the world that he was very poor—ay, there's the rub! She would marvel at his impudence in addressing her, to-morrow; he so “tattered and torn,” the wreck of the better days from which he had drifted. He wondered at his own impudence already, and at the courage which the darkness had given him.

CHAPTER II.

"QUITE FRIENDS!"

IT was seven in the morning when the young lady came up the stairs to the deck of the *Witch*. There was no sun to welcome her, the sky was a dead grey, and the wind was cold and piercing enough to drive her back again to the warm shelter of the cabin, had she been of a less resolute nature, or less fond of fresh air. She went across to the same seat which she had quitted some hours before at the suggestion of her fellow-passenger, and gazed thoughtfully at the vast expanse of sea wave. Land behind her, land in advance, there was no sign of now, and she felt more alone in the world possibly, as she looked dreamily ahead, as at the fortunes of her life, advancing slowly to her.

There were few sailors on deck, the steamship was making way steadily to port, and the one passenger, with his hands in his pockets, was talking to the chief mate at a respectful distance from her. Yes, he was very queer in the daylight; even Miss Hildebrandt, unaccustomed to criticise the costume of those who crossed her

path, was struck with him at first sight, and for some inexplicable reason was pained, having already the consciousness that it was a "gentleman born" who had addressed her last night, and a gentleman at a low ebb is one of the sorriest sights in all the world, be it the world's fault or his own.

The contrast between these two passengers was the more marked as Miss Hildebrandt came out in rich warm colours in the daylight, and was well-clad and well-furred as befitted the inclement season, whilst the gentleman's light overcoat had once done duty as a "zephyr" at the races, or covered his full-dress suit when bound for ball and opera in the old days when money was a drug in his market. The coat was frayed at the cuffs now; the bottoms of his trousers were fringed; there was an ugly patch of grey on the drab cloth ground of his arm above the elbow, and the felt hat was of many hues besides its original brown. Still he was a clean, well-shaven man; he had found some means to wash and brighten himself up that morning, and there was no poverty in his face at least. On the contrary, his was a face worth studying: it was so utterly irreconcilable with his attire, so full of courage, even of pride at times, and with an unflinching look ahead still, as if there was nothing beyond to daunt him, or to keep him down. A laughing, handsome face enough—some remark of the mate's or his own had lighted it up at that moment with a new expression, telling of

humour in him, or a keen appreciation of the humorous in others, and the grave lines about his mouth vanished on the instant. When he became aware that Miss Hildebrandt had glanced in his direction, he raised his hat as to some one whom he knew, and the young lady started as if taken unawares, and then bowed slightly to his salutation.

He was glad of that; he did not know why, but it put him in better spirits on the instant; she had not cut him dead; he had not wholly shocked her by his display of poverty. He was sorry—he could not explain that feeling either—that she was such "a swell"; he had expected to find a neatly-clad lady, the texture of her dress symbolical of nothing more than eighteenpence the yard—a business-like little woman, going to a house of business, probably on English ground instead of French. Now she puzzled him. And her face, too—surely there was a strange story in it. It was the fresh young face of a girl of eighteen, and it was full of expression, even of beauty to those who like dark faces, and the light and life that are generally in them. A face full of earnestness and thought, and far from a weak one, her observer fancied.

"That is a woman who can speak out," he muttered to himself; "I like such women."

Had his experience lain hitherto amongst women who would not speak out, who kept their joys and troubles, their griefs and pleasures, to themselves, and so deceived those who would

have been glad of their confidence? The heartiness of his tone of soliloquy seemed to hint at this.

He walked towards her, but not too hurriedly. He finished his conversation with the mate of the vessel before he approached her, prepared for a rebuff, and yet strangely resolved to seek it. He could not account for his wish to address this young lady again; he was not a lady's man with a bad habit of running after ladies, and seeking new acquaintances from their midst; he was a man who felt he was in the shade, and that it was his policy to keep there. But this lady was alone, without even a book to read; she was his one fellow-passenger, and he had the courage to address her—felt even singularly impelled towards it. If she did not care to speak to him in return, no matter; a few hours and they would be no longer parts of one little world. There came a faint impression to his mind that he might even be of service to her, that she was a stranger to the land she was approaching, and he might assist her with a little information, supposing that she encouraged him to be communicative. At all events her fine feathers did not daunt him.

"Good morning," he said, as he advanced.

"Good morning," she replied, immediately and unaffectedly.

"You are glad to escape that stuffy cabin downstairs, I perceive," he said.

"I love the sea," she answered.

"And yet this is a new experience to you," he said, remembering her expression of a few hours before.

"So far as a sea voyage is concerned, yes," she said, "but life by the sea—no."

"You live at Honfleur?"

"I came from Paris to Honfleur yesterday."

"At this time of year you would have found the voyage from Calais to Dover more convenient."

"Oh! yes; but I could not go that way."

The quickness, the genuineness of her replies were pleasant to listen to; she spoke to an equal in rank, or she was short-sighted and unaware of that patch on his arm. Could she see, though, that beyond the present life of him and of the shadows wherein he stood there shone the light of brighter days? She was shrewd, and no mean judge of character if she could see thus far; a generous being, too, who was kind and conciliatory in her manner in consequence—one who might have turned from him, and even suspected him had he been dressed more in the fashion of the times. And yet possibly one who saw all this, and pitied him in consequence;—he hoped not that. He had always hated pity!

He sat down beside her for the convenience of conversation, and she did not appear surprised, or edge herself away from him. If there was nothing bold in his companion's manner, there was nothing shy or timid. She was not em-

barrassed in any way; she looked steadily at him, as if endeavouring to read his character correctly, or to judge the value of his words by the tone which he gave to them. A young woman who had mixed much in the world, he thought, and had all the self-confidence and coolness patent to ladies who have seen a great deal, and talked a great deal more. Not a miss from a boarding-school, he would have wagered a hundred pounds had he got it; but a girl who had learned her lessons in a sterner school than that, and grown all the stronger and more self-reliant in the teaching. A weak woman of her years, to begin with, would have never undertaken this journey alone, unless used to the business, and this was her first experience of a sea voyage, she had told him.

Whilst he spoke to her of Honfleur, and of France in general, as their theme of conversation widened, he was at a loss to reconcile this calm, quiet lady with her who had sobbed and cried in the shadows of the ship; she was so bright and full of conversation now, that last night's sorrow seemed very like a dream to him.

They were "quite friends" before nine of the morning—before the white cliffs of Albion shone in the light of day to them. Strange, chance acquaintanceship, not readily forgotten by either man or woman—"surely it was to be," superstitious people would have declared, judging by what lay in store for these two.

They were outspoken souls, both of them,

for each knew a little of the other's history, of the other's grief at heart, before they said good-bye at Littlehampton. And it all came about very naturally, too, and in this wise:

"Do you know England well?" she inquired of him suddenly.

"Very well. I have walked over the greater part of it in my young and happy days, when my knapsack was light and my pocket heavy." The speaker was not six and twenty, but he talked as if he were an old man.

"Do you know Birmingham?"

"Tolerably well. I know Warwickshire in general better."

"Birmingham is a big place, I believe?"

"Very busy and very smoky," he added. "Are you going there?"

"Yes. That is my—home."

She paused before the last word escaped her.

"You have a long journey before you after reaching Littlehampton," he said.

"So I am told."

"Have you settled on your route?"

"Yes, it has been carefully planned for me," she said. "Do you know any one in Birmingham?" she asked, somewhat anxiously, it seemed.

"Not a soul."

"Ah! well; then you cannot give me the information I require," she said, with a little shrug of the shoulders, that was the first evidence of any foreign habit. "I shall have to study you English for myself."

"Are you not English?" her companion asked, in some surprise.

"Did you think I was?" she rejoined.

"Certainly. You speak English without a foreign accent."

"My father is German, my mother is an English-woman. Both have been very particular about my English."

"And you have had opportunities of practising it?"

"A great many," she answered, very thoughtfully.

The white forehead certainly contracted as she answered him.

There was a disagreeable reminiscence connected with those opportunities, her companion was assured. But mutual confidence did not extend as far as "confessions," on the first occasion of their meeting.

The young lady had further questions to ask, however—in return, perhaps, for the questions which he had put to her.

"Is your home far to reach from Littlehampton, may I ask?" she said.

"My what?" he answered with a laugh.

"Your home," she repeated.

"I haven't had a home for five years," he said; "don't know what one would be like, and am only quite sure that I never appreciated the little home I had once."

"I don't understand you," she said, curiously.

"No, no, I suppose not," he replied; "and I

cannot tell you my story, even were you disposed to be bored with it. And after all, I am going to what some people would call home," he added, satirically.

"What do *you* call it?" she said, very quickly.

"The end of the first act."

"You respond in riddles," she said; "are you an actor?"

"God forbid!" he replied.

"It was a dramatic expression," she explained; "that is why I asked. Pardon me if I have hurt your feelings."

"Pardon me, young lady, but I have no feelings to hurt."

"I don't believe that," she said doubtfully.

"Thank you for the compliment," he replied, carelessly touching his hat; "but there are a good half-dozen I know will bear me out in that assertion. You are very kind to me—kind to let me talk to you, seeing what I am."

"I cannot tell what you are," she said quickly. "I may form an idea of what you have been."

"What is that?"

"A gentleman."

"No; only a gentleman's son. *They*, to quote my mysterious plural again, will tell you that Tom Dagnell was never a gentleman—never 'behaved hisself as sich!'"

She did not understand him again, and he did not respond to her inquiring eyes. He had grown light and flippant, and unlike a gentleman at last. She drew herself instinctively away

from him, or from his new manner, and there was a sudden coldness in her answers to him.

"Still," he continued, "I am going to a place that is called home, and that is situated some three or four miles from the little harbour into which we presently steam."

"Indeed."

"I am fortunate in not having so far to travel as yourself."

"Very fortunate."

"Although I would go half round the world to have the welcome home which awaits you," he said, more earnestly, and hence more naturally.

He had entrenched on dangerous ground before he was aware; he was warned of it by the scarlet blush that came quickly to her face.

"How do you know what welcome I shall have, or I deserve? You have no right to talk to me like this," she cried, indignantly.

"I beg pardon," he said, very humbly: "I am rude. I did not know what I was saying. I was thinking of my own reception rather than of yours. I would not have needlessly offended you. Believe me, I am at least too much of a gentleman for that."

"Yes, yes; I see now," she answered, more softly. "Think no more of it: I am a little hasty—it is a bad habit of mine."

"I forgot myself," he continued in the same apologetic strain, "I fancied for the moment that we were quite friends."

"Quitefriends," she echoed: "oh, no—that is not likely."

She shrugged her shoulders again and smiled, almost cruelly, at him, he fancied—looking down at him, and for the first time, from the vantage ground of her prosperity.

"Perhaps it will explain my manner, which has been a trifle eccentric," he said, still anxious to remove any bad impression which he had created, "if I allude a little more to my antecedents. I am sorry to do this, but I have displeased you, and I hate all mystery. It is no secret that I am going back to the house—we will say home now—whence I was driven out five years ago."

The lady awoke to a new interest in him, to so great an interest in his next words that he was once more perplexed by her anxiety.

"Driven away," she repeated, "by hard task-masters, by——"

"By my own wilfulness, it is said in Sussex, my own sheer wickedness," he replied.

"Were you expelled from home?" she asked.

"I walked out of the house one spring morning."

"Unable to assimilate your life to those who oppressed or thwarted it—unable to endure it any longer?"

"Exactly."

"How strange—how awfully strange!" the young girl murmured.

"I don't see——"

"No matter, go on."

"The strange part of the story is that I am going back," he said, "and that is the incomprehensible part of it."

"To the same people?"

"The same people."

"You are sorry—you see your faults—you are repentant for all the misery you have caused?"

"I would act in the same way to-morrow, could the past return to me."

"You were in the right, then—I am glad of that."

"Yes, in the right," he added, thoughtfully.

"And you return?"

"Yes."

"Because you are poor, and they are rich?" she asked, and there was a subtle ring of scorn in her low voice, amidst her pity for the weakness to which he had succumbed.

"I thought you would think that," he said, irritably: "it is a woman's judgment—quick, and unsound, and shallow, as usual. No, madam—I am implored to return."

"By whom?"

"By the mother."

"Ah! the mother—it is always the good mother!" she cried, clasping her hands together, and her eyes filling suddenly with tears.

"Not always. There is a difference in mothers, out of the pages of French plays."

"But you——"

"There, madam, that is all," he said, inter-

rupting her: "it is not much of a story, and it is soon told, you perceive. The details are not worth any one's consideration now—not even my own."

"I will not distress you further," she said. "If I have been too curious you are to blame for arousing my woman's curiosity. Is that England?"

"Yes, the white walls of our cocky little island," he replied, in his old light tone again.

"Will it be long before we reach Littlehampton?"

"An hour, perhaps. I never came this way before, but the land must have been some time in sight."

"How we have talked not to notice it," she said, with a merry little laugh, whose music thrilled him as he listened to it.

"How I have talked," he replied; "men always grow garrulous with advancing years."

"You have told me twice of your age," she said, meaningly.

"So I have. And it's all affectation, for I am young enough, after all. You are right to reprove me."

"I did not reprove you," she replied. "Now pray don't talk again. I want to think if I can trust you with a revelation, as you have trusted me. Don't look frightened!"

"On my honour, I am not frightened in the least."

"If you will leave me to myself now—that

is, until it is time to say good-day to me—I shall be obliged.”

Was Miss Hildebrandt growing flippant too, and had Mr. Dagnell's bad manners infected her? It almost seemed so. Mr. Dagnell rose and bowed politely.

“Certainly I will leave you, if you wish it,” he said.

“Thank you very much,” she answered.

It was not till they had reached Littlehampton Railway Pier that this odd pair exchanged another word together.

CHAPTER III.

SECRET FOR SECRET.

THE fast and favourite screw-steamer, "The Witch," had made a fair passage on the present occasion. Though the weather had not been wholly propitious, wind and tide had been in its favour the greater part of the way, and the clocks of Littlehampton were striking eleven when the journey was accomplished. There were not many to welcome the passengers to England, or to show any interest in their arrival; Littlehampton was not in the rollicking mood patent to English watering-places in their season, March being in its "blustering" condition, and visitors few and far between in consequence. Two old men, natives to the place, and one shabby woman in black, stood by the dumpty wooden lighthouse and looked at the vessel as it steered slowly down the Arun; and a little boy in a red comforter ran along the bank and cheered vociferously till he got entangled in his hoop and fell flatwise upon the gravel.

The stir and bustle of old England was not apparent in this sleepy spot of Sussex ground, and Miss Hildebrandt opened her eyes in some surprise at it. She had expected a country full of life and animation even to its sea-brim. Thomas Dagnell noticed that she shivered at the first glimpse of the new country, as at the strangeness and the coldness of it. They landed at the railway quay, and the stewardess came up to bid them good morning and to receive her fee from the lady passenger. Then there followed a few custom-house formalities, the more precise and vigorous as business was slack, and these two did not look like bold smugglers bringing in contraband by wholesale. The railway train was drawn up closely to the quay, and a porter put Miss Hildebrandt and her luggage into a third-class compartment. Mr. Dagnell observed this, too, with some surprise, and politely informed her that there were five minutes to wait. She turned suddenly to Mr. Dagnell and broke the spell of the long silence that had been maintained between them.

"Good morning, Mr. Dagnell," she said, extending her hand to him, after a moment's hesitation. "I hope you will find home at last, and all well at home."

"Thank you, Miss——by what name shall I have the honour of remembering you?" he asked, after shaking hands with her.

"Hildebrandt, if it is a name worth remembering," she answered.

"I shall not forget it. And the revelation," he asked, meaningly, "which you thought you might be induced to make to me? I hope it is one thing."

"What is that?"

"Your address in Birmingham."

She drew herself up very tall and erect in an instant, but he did not appear to notice the change in her. He was standing with one foot upon the carriage-board of the train, and looking down thoughtfully whilst he spoke. He went on, coolly and calmly enough,

"I should be glad to know where you are. I may come to Birmingham some day. You have been more of a friend to me than I have had for years."

"Good morning."

"But at all events you might want a friend, or the advice of a friend, for you are young and alone here. Will you try and think of my address—Tom Dagnell, Broadlands, near Littlehampton."

"I should not write to you for advice under any circumstances," she replied.

He looked up quickly, and saw at last that he had "done it" in the matter of polite attention. Yes, these were the manners of the bag-man again, not of the gentleman. This was 'Arry landing at Margate Jetty, not Tom Dagnell, at Littlehampton.

"Yes, yes, I am wrong," he said, hurriedly. "Forgive me, I was presuming on your courtesy."

I hardly knew what I was saying, save that I am sorry to say 'Good-bye.' By George, that's making matters worse, is it not? I had better only say 'Good morning,' Miss Hildebrandt, and wish you a safe journey into Warwickshire."

"Thank you," she replied, more generously; "you will find good friends at home at last."

"Thank *you* for your prophecy."

"You could not have left a home like mine, for instance; and there will be that happiness in returning which it will never be my good fortune to discover."

"Miss Hildebrandt!"

"There, that is my confession for confession. I thought it might make you more content to know that there were men and women worse off in the world than yourself. You *are* going home—I ran away from mine yesterday. Good morning."

The train was moving as she spoke. She smiled as it glided from him, but there were tears in her eyes, and the small red mouth was quivering very much. For in the fulness of the heart it had spoken to this strange man, whose life was not unlike her own in one respect at least. Here had been a home-wreck and a soul cut adrift. He was ending the life that she had begun; and she was only a girl of eighteen, in a strange country.

Still there were those in England to whom she was not entirely strange, and watchful eyes for good or for evil following her movements, had

Miss Hildebrandt or Tom Dagnell been aware of it.

M. Hildebrandt, of No. 487, troisième étage, Faubourg St. Lupine, in the city of Paris, received the following telegram before nightfall:—

"She has reached England. She was accompanied as far as Littlehampton by a Mr. Dagnell, of Broadlands. I have telegraphed to Birmingham."

CHAPTER IV.

HOME.

TOM DAGNELL walked out of the station into the roadway beyond, and looked right and left as if for a friend or a vehicle that might be waiting for him. Two flymen in attendance glanced in his direction, but did not solicit him as a fare—he was so horribly shabby in the daylight.

“It is as well they haven’t the carriage for me—the horses might have caught their deaths of cold, poor things,” he said quietly to himself, as he returned to the station and gave directions for his small portmanteau to be sent to Broadlands. The proper despatch of his luggage having been arranged for, our hero—for this ne’er-do-weel young gentleman is all the hero of whom this story will have to boast—set forth at a brisk pace in an inland direction, turning his back upon the sea and marching up-town and past the town into the green lanes lying beyond. Two miles of ground were quickly covered at the pace which Tom Dagnell had chosen, and he rested not, nor flinched not in

his progress. He was glad to get his blood into circulation for one thing; he would be glad to get the first home meeting over for another, now that he had made up his mind to return; and he went swiftly on, with a set face that was more stern and resolute in its expression than when Miss Hildebrandt glanced at it on board "The Witch." This seemed the face of a man who had a disagreeable task before him, or thought that he had, judging by his past knowledge of those whom he was presently to meet. It was not a face radiant and aglow with the thought of the home happiness awaiting him; he had been unlucky in his pilgrimage, just as they had prophesied he would be, but he had not been unhappy in his lower estate, and in going back there lacked all sign of joy in him. When the house was in sight—a large, old-fashioned, red brick edifice, rendered picturesque by the ivy climbing in profusion on its walls, and by the fair park and pasture land, in the midst of which it stood—the face shadowed even more, and became more stern and grave. The reminiscences were not pleasant that had been conjured up at the sight of the old home—or the last parting there rankled as a bitter memory at the bottom of his heart.

"After all, Tom," he said, in self apostrophe, "what have you come back for? What is the use of it?"

He laughed in an odd, unhilarious fashion by way of response to his inquiries, and then pushed

open the swing-gate, and went at the same swift pace along the carriage drive, faltering not one step by the way. It was with the same quick, regular footfalls, that he had left home five years ago, without looking back regretfully; he had made up his mind then, and he had made up his mind now. Here was the end of the first act, as he had told his fellow-passenger in the early morning of that day. Upon what scenes and characters, what plot and counter-plot the curtain would rise again, he knew no more than she did—and he was far less curious.

Under a quaint porch of carved wood-work, he came to a halt, seized the knocker and bell, and knocked and rang in a noisy and imperious style, as if defiant of the ears and nerves of those within—a bravado-like summons for admittance, that brought a stout, nubbly-faced, white-haired man, in black, in considerable haste towards him. Through the half-glass of the door, Tom Dagnell saw the man advance across a marble-chequered hall, followed by a footman in livery, whom he had forestalled, and whom he sent back again with a quick wave of his hand. The door was opened, and the rugged-faced man, gasping for breath, held out both hands, even both arms, as though he would have been glad to clasp the young man in them, and began to choke and sob.

“My dear young Master Tom,” he cried, “I am so glad—so very glad to see you home again. I—I never thought to live to see the

blessed day that this is, sir, to me; I never, never did!"

"You did not think I should come back?"

"No—I didn't."

"See what a forgiving fellow I am, Robin," he said, laughing, as he shook hands with him, "see how the prodigal son comes creeping home to the shelter, when the last shilling has slipped out of his pocket."

"Oh! no—no—you can't get over me with that talk," said the old man, shaking his head vigorously: "I know all about it—I know everything."

"Wise old Robin, you always did," said Tom, clapping him on the back. "There, leave off whimpering. Why should you be glad that I have returned? I always gave you heaps of trouble."

"Which I never minded—did I?"

"No, Robin."

"Which I never shall mind, Master Tom—which—and, good Lord, but you have altered a main sight when one comes to look at you nigher."

"Yes, I have improved, Robin—grown out of knowledge almost," he replied. "I have been thoroughly polished and refurbished by five years sojourn on the Continent."

"I don't know what you've sojerred on," said the old man, with a vigorous scratch to his grey locks, "but you're not too smart for a Dagnell."

"For the Dagnells who are waiting for me," he added, "the good father, mother, brother, and cousin—where are they all?"

"Your mother and Master Marcus are in the big drawing-room," was the answer. "Your father and Miss Ursula are upstairs in the father's room. He does not rise as early as he used."

"Given up one bad habit, then," was the dry remark here.

"Good or bad habit, it doesn't agree with him now," said Robin. "He's awful changed, Master Tom," added the old man, sinking his voice to a whisper, "and you'll hardly know him."

"So altered as that!" said the son, thoughtfully.

"Not that you need say he's changed so much—for he doesn't like it. And it makes him nervous."

"Nervous!" echoed Tom, with a shrug of his shoulders: "is it possible?"

"So you needn't——"

"All right, I understand, Robin. I am to come back with a lie in my mouth, and say, 'How well you are looking, Sir John'?"

"You need not have put it in that way," said the other in an aggrieved tone; "I don't think I would have put it in that way myself, at first go-off like, and after five years of keeping from us."

"Never mind, Robin. Perhaps I am in the wrong—I generally am," he said, "but here's for Sir John."

"To the master first?" said the old man, surprised: "I thought that you——"

"I will see my mother presently. She is well?"

"Oh! quite well, and wishes to——"

"Prepare me for meeting with my father, and so forth. Yes, I understand, but I will see Sir John, to begin with."

"But——"

"And I *am* quite prepared already," he interrupted. "Tell them, with my most respectful compliments, that I have gone straight up to him."

He crossed the hall, and went rapidly up the stairs, a man still in a hurry to get through the task he had set himself when he had first started on this errand. Old Robin Fisher watched him open-mouthed until he had turned the bend of the broad stairs and disappeared.

"As wilful as ever—as red-hot as when he went away," he muttered, "but I hope it will come right now. It's what I've been looking for'ard to for many years."

CHAPTER V.

SIR JOHN DAGNELL.

THE prodigal son had not forgotten his way about the house which he had quitted so unceremoniously some five years since. He went straight to the door of his father's apartment, and knocked upon its panels. The instant afterwards there was a clattering of brass rings upon a pole, the drawing back of a heavy curtain from the inner side, and the opening of the door, slowly and cautiously, as though the room were in a state of siege. A plain woman above the middle height, and some eight and twenty years of age, stood in the doorway, calmly surveying him, without a sign of colour or embarrassment upon a pale, set face. She was short-sighted, and wore glasses, through which she peered with keen grey eyes at the intruder—looking hard at him as if to read upon his face the bent of mind with which he had come home.

"You *have* returned, then?" she said, in a low tone.

"Yes, Ursula, I have returned."

He extended his hand, a sign of the warmer feeling that he bore towards her than to all the

rest of them, and she put a small white cold hand within his own and let it lay there passively. There was no cordiality of greeting in return, and it was hard, even for him, to guess whether his cousin was glad or sorry to see him home. He thought that she was sorry—as he might have expected from the first she would be—but he did not tax her with the coldness of his welcome. He had offended her, too, and given vent to many harsh words on the day he went away. It was not likely that Ursula Dagnell had forgiven him in the little heart that she had seemed to possess. She was as he had expected to find her—as she had ever been, for that matter—and he was not surprised. He had been forgetful for an instant—having spent five years with people of warmer blood, of less propriety and starch—that was all.

“Is Sir John ready to see me?” he asked, when he had relinquished his cousin’s hand.

“I will ask him.”

The heavy folds of the curtain dropped between them, and Tom Dagnell was left outside to await his father’s pleasure. There was an interval of a minute or two, during which time the son stood moodily looking at the floor, then the rings clattered and the curtain was drawn back again—this time more completely, to allow of his ingress.

“You can come in,” said Ursula; “my uncle has been expecting you all the morning.”

Tom stepped into the room, the curtain rings

clanged and clashed behind him, and the curtain was once more carefully drawn across the door. It was a large room, but the atmosphere was stifling, on first entrance, to a man who had been breathing fresh sea air for the last twelve hours. There was a fire burning in the grate, but Tom Dagnell could not see it for the grand old lacquered screen behind which his father cowered, as if in fear, away from him. He should not see the father till he had crossed the room and turned the angle of the screen.

Ursula knew this, and touched his arm as if in caution, or in warning to her cousin. Not a word was spoken, but he guessed her meaning very correctly; he was to be as careful of the words which escaped his lips as of the feelings of him to whom those words would be addressed. He nodded by way of assurance that he was on his guard, and then passed round the screen and stood in the presence of a father strangely changed and stricken down.

Five years ago he had left a tall, robust, healthful man of fifty years, with fire in his eyes, and colour on his cheeks. Now he came upon a man sallow and attenuated, or rather the shadow of a man flickering faintly on the threshold of death's door.

Tom Dagnell recoiled at the great change, but he recovered himself very quickly. The father looked up at him grimly and yet wistfully, and neither extended a hand towards the other. There was a strange silent pause as if for breath, or

thought, or observation, or for all three together, perhaps, and Ursula Dagnell watched like a figure of fate in the background the meeting of these men.

The elder was the first to speak, in the querulous tone of a sick man, and to the niece, not the son.

"He does not say a word to me, Ursula," he remarked.

"You have forgotten, Sir John," said the hard voice of Ursula, in reply.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. Tom," he piped in a low weak treble—it had been a deep bass voice when Tom had heard it last—"I am sorry for all I said five years ago. I beg your pardon."

"Thank you, sir. I had hoped and thought you would some day," replied the son; then he stooped over the crushed man, and resting his hands upon his shoulders, kissed him on the forehead as a little child might have done. He had hardly expected to forgive so completely and so soon all the injustice of the past, but the father's downfall had taken him by surprise, and this man forgave completely when he forgave at all.

"I was in the wrong for the most part," Sir John added, not in a deep-feeling manner, but as a parrot might have said it after a week or two of practice, and in a similar key.

"Say no more about it, father; the dead can rest in peace after five years," remarked the son.

"Yes, yes, exactly; but you need not talk about the dead for all that—it's not a nice subject for a sick man. Sit down, and tell me how you think I'm looking."

"Somewhat ill, certainly," said Tom, sitting down, thus adjured.

"I suppose you wouldn't have known me at first sight?"

"I think I should have known you."

"There, Ursula, he would have known me. I have not altered so much."

"Oh yes, you have," said Tom; "but still I should have known you anywhere."

"Well, then, I can't have altered so very much."

"Not to me," responded the son.

"I was terribly changed some weeks since, but it is astonishing how I have been improving lately," said Sir John. "Ask your cousin Ursula how I have improved."

"You seem a little stronger just now," said Ursula for herself.

"What has been the matter with you?" asked Tom. "Why was I not sent for at an earlier date, and when you were worse than this?"

He turned to his cousin for an explanation, which she gave him clearly and plainly.

"Sir John was not well enough to make his wishes known to us until four days since," she said.

"It was your wish then, Sir John—not the mother's?" he muttered.

"It was my wish," replied Sir John; "I wanted

you home again, and they were not going to persuade me to the contrary."

"They thought it was better for me to keep away still?" Tom said, lightly. "Ah! well, they were in the right, very probably. We must not blame them for the good advice they gave you."

His cousin Ursula condescended to explain once more.

"We were afraid of the result of a meeting between you, my uncle being very weak, and you quickly angry and impatient. We thought you might return with the same thoughts and feelings as you quitted us——"

"So I have," said Tom, interrupting her at this juncture.

Ursula Dagnell went on as if she had not heard him.

"With the same hot words and fierce accusations against all of us—the just and the unjust alike. He," pointing to her uncle, "was not strong enough, is not strong enough to bear a repetition of the scene that was once enacted here. It would kill him."

"I don't want a scene," muttered Sir John, "but I am not so easily killed. You exaggerate my weakness, Ursula."

"I should not have returned to quarrel with you, father," said his son. "I should have preferred to keep away. I had spoken my mind and gone for good, and there was an end of it. I said I would come back when you owned yourself in the wrong, and begged pardon for

the injury you had done me. I have come back on those conditions, and all is peace between us."

"I am glad of it; I bear no man any malice now for the trouble he has been to me," replied Sir John.

"But you don't think——"

"There is peace between you," said Ursula, very quickly here, "and you have owned to that, Thomas Dagnell. Never again a recurrence to the past mistakes in this house, or it will be my turn to go away from Broadlands."

Sir John shivered in his chair at this threat, and spread his thin hands before his face.

"All against me," he murmured. "I haven't a friend in the world."

"You have one more than you had yesterday, Sir John," remarked his son.

"Yes, yes, that is so, after all; I rely upon you," was the reply; "that is why I have sent for you thus suddenly. I want to talk to you in private, and on private matters of importance; come close to me, please."

"Not now," said Ursula, very firmly.

"There is so much to say," urged the sick man, "and if I were to get as weak again as I was last month—and there's no telling what might happen—I, I——"

"Not now," repeated Ursula, still more decisively.

"This evening, then. Late at night, when I can't sleep for thinking of it, I may as well be

talking of it, surely. Will you come to-night to my room, or meet me in the library?"

"When and where it pleases you, sir," answered his son.

"At any time?"

"At any time."

"Thank you, Tom: you were always an obliging fellow, and did not mind what trouble you took," said his father. "I will say that for you, with all your awful failings."

"You had better leave him," said his niece; "he is not so well as when you came in."

"You may think so if you please, Ursula," said Sir John, "but I know better."

Tom Dagnell surveyed his father attentively, and was of his cousin's opinion despite the sick knight's protest. He rose from his chair and said:

"I will go and see Lady Dagnell and Marcus now, with your good leave, Sir John."

"You are no sooner in the room than you are anxious to get out of it," the father grumbled. "Any one would think we had met an hour ago, and had nothing further to communicate."

"I shall have plenty of opportunities to tell you my life and adventures," said Tom.

"I don't want to hear about them particularly," said Sir John. "They will take up a deal of time, and time has become valuable to me."

"Well, good evening for the present."

"I hope to be in the library in another hour," said his father.

"I shall not forget."

"You haven't too good a memory for all that," replied Sir John. "You asked me what had been the matter with me, but you have forgotten that I never answered you."

"I thought my cousin Ursula might spare you all painful details," said Tom Dagnell.

"Thank you for nothing. The details are not painful, and they may afford you a warning."

"Indeed!"

"I got into a violent temper, and I had been so well and strong all the year before, till that damned aggravating Marcus——"

"Good morning, father," said Tom, hurrying away.

"Brought on a fit—a cursed fit—it was all his fault," were the last words Tom Dagnell heard amidst a clattering of curtain rings as the drapery was pulled aside and the door was opened by his cousin to allow him to pass through.

Outside in the corridor, and with the sick-room closed and locked against him, Tom Dagnell came to a full stop, as if to reflect for an instant upon the nature of his greeting. There was a puzzled air upon his face, as though he had encountered much that had perplexed him; but if there lay a mystery beyond the present hour and across his future path, he simply shrugged his shoulders at it, after the habit he had learned in France—after Miss Hildebrandt's habit.

"Now for the other members of this interesting family," he said, satirically, as he moved away from the precincts of his father's room.

CHAPTER VI.

THE REST OF THEM.

AT the bottom of the stairs, Tom Dagnell found Mr. Fisher, the butler, waiting for him.

"Is it all right, Master Tom?" he inquired in a husky whisper. "Have you made it up with the old gentleman?"

"We are the best of friends, Robin."

"That's well; we have got over the worst of it," said Mr. Fisher, greatly relieved.

"Yes, *we* have," was the quiet answer back.

"They're waiting for you in the drawing-room, the rest of 'em. I told my lady you had gone upstairs to your father," said the butler. "This way, sir."

"Get out with you, Robin; don't you think I remember my way?" Tom said, spinning the old butler round by the collar of his coat. "There, go and look up the best wine for luncheon you have in the cellar, and be quick about it—that is your enviable province."

"Oh! the lad you are still!" exclaimed Robin Fisher. "But if you don't mind, Master Tom, just for once, now, I should like to announce you in that room."

"Why?"

"It's a grand day for me," said the old man, with a quavering voice, "a very grand day, indeed. I always told them you would come back the same as ever."

"I'm a sorry subject to announce, Robin," replied Tom; "but if you wish it, fire away!"

Mr. Fisher did not wait for a second bidding, but toddled as well as his gouty feet would permit to the drawing-room, which he opened and flung wide.

"Mr. Thomas Dagnell," he shouted pompously, as our hero entered and saluted the inmates of the room with a bow—so low a bow that one might have fancied there was satire in it, even in those early times of greeting, after five years of separation.

There were two inmates of the room into which Tom Dagnell had been thus ceremoniously ushered, and both rose ceremoniously also as he entered, and bowed with as grave formality as he, taking their cue possibly from him. The prodigal son advanced, however, in the same straightforward fashion as heretofore, and finished the lesson which he had set himself to learn.

He extended his hand to Lady Dagnell, saying, "I hope I find you well, mother?" Then he turned to his brother, and shook too warmly and painfully a hand slowly extended also in his direction.

"And you, too, Marcus?" he added.

"I am as well as I ever hope to be in this

world, Thomas," said his mother languidly, as she subsided into the easy-chair from which she had arisen.

"I'm pretty well, thanks," said Marcus, with a drawl, as he opened and shut slowly the fingers which his brother had too closely gripped. "Will you take a seat?"

"Thank you, Marcus," was the reply: "it will be more convenient, as I have come back again for good."

"Ye-es, exactly; so you have, by Jove!" said the elder brother; then his power of conversation failed him, and he remained speechless.

Meanwhile Tom Dagnell looked round him and about him. It was the same garish, disagreeable room as ever, he thought, only blue satin damask had replaced the crimson; and everything was as new, and bright, and showy, as when he had left it last. The mother was changed, and looked more lined and sallow, despite the deep tinge of artificial red upon her cheeks. Lady Dagnell was a lady well preserved, of fifty-four or fifty-five years, with a false front and false teeth to match the false colours under which her vanities complacently sailed. She was a tall, thin lady, elaborately costumed for morning wear, and with more jewellery weighing her down than one is accustomed to see at that time of the day on ladies of any rank in life. A weakly woman, possibly, was Lady Dagnell, but one who still strove to bear up bravely with the fashion plates, and loved dress to desperation.

Her eldest son, Marcus, was also got up with the same scrupulous regard for what was fashionable and becoming to his person, and thus afforded the more striking contrast to the travel-stained apparel of his younger brother. Marcus Dagnell was a young and highly-starched likeness of the father, whom we have left upstairs—a tall, thin, washed-out man, caught viciously round the neck by a stiff shirt-collar, which held his head in a trap and kept it rigid. Having done the honour of receiving his brother home, he subsided into silence and left the talking to his mother, but there was a faint amount of interest, or curiosity, in the dull blue eyes which remained fixed upon Tom, or Tom's shabby overcoat, with a lack-lustrous stare.

"There will be numerous opportunities afforded us to speak of the future, Thomas," said his mother—"of the future as regards yourself, I mean, of course."

"And of the past—what of that?" inquired her son. "Shall we tie a stone round its neck, and sink it?"

"The past is not a dead dog, son," said Lady Dagnell, with a little shudder.

"No—it was a mad dog, and wanted to bite everybody," was the son's remark; "and dead or alive now, at least we *will* sink it."

"I do not wish to allude to anything unpleasant. Heaven knows," said the mother, mincingly, "I am not strong enough for altercation now. Time has tried me very much."

"You are looking older, certainly," said Tom.

"I don't mean in that way," said Lady Dagnell, quickly; "I may have changed a little, though you are the first to remark it, but it is the heart and the brain that have suffered with me. Your father's illness has been so distressing to us all, to me especially. He has been very violent at times, and always terribly obstinate."

"Dreadfully obstinate," said Marcus, in a low tone.

"We have not murmured or repined," the mother continued. "We have struggled to bear up against the heavy hand of affliction that has pressed us in the dust—we are struggling still—we shall struggle to the end."

"Is the end near?" asked Tom Dagnell, bluntly.

"Heaven forbid that it should be! Do you think so?" asked his mother.

"*He* thought so when he sent for me," said Tom, confidently.

"He was very sad and strange all that day," Lady Dagnell replied.

"Awfully queer," added Marcus; "no cheering him up at all."

"Did *you* try to cheer him?" asked Tom, curiously.

"Yes, I tried."

"And failed?"

"Yes, I failed."

"So I should have imagined," said Tom. "Ha, ha!" and here he broke into his first hearty laugh: "fancy Marcus trying to cheer up the governor!"

Marcus attempted a sickly smile at this, but Lady Dagnell lay back on her chair, and fanned herself slowly.

"You have come back at a sad time, Thomas," she said, "and your boisterous spirits jar strangely on me, at present. I am not used to boisterous spirits,—I shall be soon, I hope. Marcus?"

"Yes, mamma."

"You and your brother will take a stroll through the grounds before luncheon. You can tell him everything better than I can in my enervated state. You will like to see what improvements have been made in the grounds, Thomas, since you were here last."

"I should prefer seeing what improvements have been made in the larder," her son responded.

"Ah! you are hungry, perhaps?" said Lady Dagnell.

"Hungry? I should think I was," answered her son. "I left Honfleur on the strength of the scanty supper that Madame Vermont got me, and there was but a poor breakfast to be secured on board ship at seven this morning. Suppose we lunch now, and see the grounds afterwards?"

"I should be seriously ill for days, if I lunched before my usual time," said Lady Dagnell. "I must live by rule, or succumb. But if you would like——"

"Certainly, I do like," said Tom, jumping up and ringing the bell, "and I gave poor old Fisher the hint a little while ago. You must excuse

me, mother, if I make myself at home—now that I have accepted all this”—he spread his hands wide as he spoke—“as home, or as the something that can only stand for it.”

Lady Dagnell did not reply, and Mr. Fisher, with a beaming face, appeared at the door in response to the summons.

“Is that luncheon ready, Fisher?” inquired Tom.

“Yes, sir, it’s all ready for you in the dining-room—I thought you might be ready for it, too, Master Tom, after your sea voyage,” said the butler.

“That is not the proper way to address your master’s son, Mr. Fisher,” remarked Lady Dagnell. “You forget——”

“No, no, I don’t forget anything, my lady—and least of all was I likely to forget that. But he’s just home, you see, and my heart’s full at the sight of him again. I’ll be more in my place to-morrow,” he muttered.

“Wait till I put you there,” said Tom; “and now lead the way, Caleb Balderstone.”

“Just like his old fun,” said the butler, with a chuckle; “he’s beginning to call me names, too. Bald as a stone, indeed!—no, not so bad as that, Master Tom. This way, sir—this way, if you please.”

The butler and his young master quitted the drawing-room, and Lady Dagnell looked across at the son remaining to her.

“You had better go with him, Marcus; he

will only talk to Fisher too much," she murmured; "he was always too friendly with Fisher."

Marcus looked with mild dismay at his watch.

"By Jove, it's not one o'clock yet," he said; "I could not eat a morsel."

"What does that matter?" asked the mother, peevishly.

"It matters a considerable deal to me to be compelled to swallow down a luncheon an hour before I am ready for it," Marcus said, slowly, as he departed in quest of his brother.

In the dining-room he found his younger brother had begun his luncheon, with Mr. Fisher as an admiring sentinel in the background.

"I thought you were not coming, Marcus," said Tom, looking up as he entered.

"Oh! ye-es; I couldn't leave you alone entirely."

"Robin and I were jogging on very well together—what'll you have? Here's cold roast beef, fowl and ham, and a pasty of some sort to your left."

"Tha-anks; but I think I'll wait till a more reasonable hour. I have no appetite."

"Up late last night?"

"Not at all."

"Down late this morning? That was always an infernal habit of yours, Marcus."

"Early rising never agreed with me, and I don't suppose it ever will."

"I don't suppose you'll ever try it," said Tom. "The hours I used to spend in the park whilst

you were droning away in bed! Do you remember at Swishem's Academy, too, how you caught it one day for not turning out after the bell had rung the second time? You went clean off to sleep again, and Swishem's cane on a tender spot was the next alarum. That was the only time in my life I saw you give a good jump."

The prim Marcus smiled feebly for the second time; his brother's genial manner had helped to thaw him somewhat, and he was a man not easily thawed. He had not smiled for the last six months before that day—not having seen or heard anything to smile at, in his poor estimation of what was worth creasing his cheeks for. He had a theory as regarded smiles, and laughter, too, and was especially wary of hilarious moments. They conduced to premature wrinkles, he was certain, and his personal appearance had been a matter of grave study for the last ten years of his life. He was twenty-nine years of age, and getting nervous about wrinkles. He wished he had not smiled just then, but he had been taken off his guard, being not altogether sorry to see his brother Tom again.

"I think I'll drink a glass of hock with you," he said; "it will not agree with me, but a fellow feels like a fool sitting at a table with nothing to do but see another fellow eat. Tha-anks."

This was to his brother, who had filled the glass at his elbow before the butler could get round to it. Marcus raised the glass to his lips,

sniffed, sipped, drank, and then focussed Mr. Fisher with an inquiring stare.

"What wine is this, Fisher?"

"Johannisberg, sir."

"The Schloss Johannisberg of fifty-eight, Fisher—is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"We are not in the habit of drinking fifty-eight Johannisberg at luncheon, Fisher," Marcus said, with a grave shake of the head.

"No, sir; but I thought the best wine would suit the best day that has come to us this year," was Mr. Fisher's answer.

"I don't exactly comprehend what right you had to think anything about it, Fisher," Marcus said, in the same slow drawl, "and if you had mentioned it to me——"

"I told him to get the best wine out of the cellar, Marcus," said Tom; "it's my fault. I was always a silly fellow who liked the best of everything."

"That alters the question of the case, of course," said Marcus. "I'm sorry I alluded to it, but it struck me it was deuced good wine all of a sudden, and the governor keeps the vintage awfully thin for ordinary occasions. I may say in confidence, Tom, that vinegar is the word, as a general rule, for wine here. White vinegar and red."

"Try another glass of this while you can get it."

"Tha-anks," said Marcus; "if you don't want

the whole of the bottle, I think I will trouble you for another glass. And really, if I thought it would not be a serious inconvenience to me, I would attempt a wing of that chicken, and get a lunch away from the womenfolk for once."

"Ay, do; then we can chat together for half-an-hour in peace, in the park."

"The park's dreadfully damp before the afternoon sun gets at it."

"Is the billiard-room in working order still?"

"Yes, that's pretty right," was the reply, "if Grimshaw has not left the windows open all night. Grimshaw is a perfect fool about those windows, isn't he, Fisher?"

"He is, sir, puffed."

When the early lunch was concluded, the brothers adjourned to the billiard-room—a well-proportioned room in the right wing of the house, and with French windows looking upon the garden. They were alone together after five years of separation, but there were no confidences sought or exchanged—the younger brother was indifferent, or appeared to be so, to all that had happened since his departure; the elder was phlegmatic and fond of billiards. Marcus Dagnell took his brother's coming, as he had taken his flitting, with extraordinary composure, but then, his blood flowed slowly in his veins, and no man living had seen him at fever heat.

Marcus removed his coat and hung it with great care on a peg by the door, smoothing

the creases from it as he did so; Tom slipped out of his own threadbare garment and pitched it carelessly on the raised seat by the wall. It was possible to guess somewhat of the characters of the brothers by even these slight actions.

"I suppose when the governor wants me in the library, he'll send for me," said Tom, as he took down a cue from the frame. "I said I was at his service when he wished."

"He'll send Ursula fast enough when he wants you," said Marcus. "You may rest assured of that. Will you begin?"

"As you please."

Billiards was commenced and pursued for a while in silence, until Tom, who was getting the better of the game, gave vent, half unconsciously, to an air from *Il Barbieri*, executed in a shrill whistle. Marcus raised his hand in a deprecating manner, and surveyed his brother with a pained expression of countenance.

"I wish you wouldn't, Tom. Upon my honour, my head will not stand that sort of thing this morning," he remarked.

"Are you not well?"

"There's a pressure here that is unpleasant," he said, laying his hand on the top of his head very carefully. "I suppose it's taking lunch too early. I was afraid I was acting rashly when you suggested chicken. I wish you hadn't."

"Do you play as well as you used at this game, Marcus?"

"I don't know.' You play a deuced sight better, at any rate."

"I have practised a great deal abroad," said Tom; "have been at times almost a billiard-sharper, Marcus."

"Good Gad—really!"

"Fifty—*game*—there goes five shillings for you. We used always to play for five shillings a game, if you remember?"

"I don't seem to remember that, Tom," said Marcus; "it's terrifically high."

"At all events, we didn't mention stakes on this occasion."

"Certainly we did not mention stakes, Tom. You never said a word concerning them."

"Then we will not call this a five-shilling game."

Marcus appeared to be slightly relieved, and urged no protest.

"We must not have the old gambling spirit rife in Broadlands again," said Tom, re-chalking his cue as his brother spotted the red ball. "We must play for love, or counters, as gravely as we play decorum. Now, then!"

The door opened, and checked the first stroke on the green cloth. Ursula Dagnell came softly and noiselessly towards them.

"What a beginning of life together, and at this time, too!" she said sharply, almost scornfully.

"We can't sit and mope all day, Ursula," replied Marcus, "upon my honour."

"Haven't you told your brother anything?"

"Not a word."

"Has not aunt?"

"There's plenty of time to tell him," said Marcus. "I don't see any occasion for hurry myself."

"It is an agreeable task which you have left for me," she said, very bitterly, "as you leave everything in your selfishness—as you always have done."

"Upon my word, Ursula, you are down upon a fellow," said Marcus; "you fly into a passion at a moment's notice, or without a moment's notice, just like——"

"Your brother Tom," she added, as he paused for a comparison.

"What is to be the first revelation, may I inquire?" asked Tom of Ursula. "I left this place a house of mystery—I return to find the same miserable shadows lurking here."

"Shadows! Oh, yes," said Ursula. "They are all here still."

She opened the French window, and Marcus, who had a susceptible throat, hastened to put on his coat, and button it carefully over his chest.

"I wonder when we shall get rid of this confounded east wind?" he said.

"Come into the garden with me, Tom; I will speak to you there," suggested Ursula.

"Certainly. Marcus, will you join us, or excuse me?"

"I would rather excuse you, please," said

Marcus, beginning to practise "cannons" before his brother had followed Ursula to the lawn beyond the house; "you'll find me here, when you are disengaged."

"Now, Ursula, I am ready," said Tom, as he approached his cousin's side: "what is the news you have for me? Why have they sent for me in this hot haste?"

"To marry me," said Ursula, very composedly.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COUSINS.

It is possible that Tom Dagnell had prepared himself for a surprise, but it was certainly not in this direction. He went back a step or two, he changed colour, he looked into the pale plain face of the lady confronting him, and he finally burst into a hearty laugh.

"Well, it is very kind of them to settle our futures in this free and easy fashion," he said: "it is the coolest proposal of all the coolest proposals that Sir John Dagnell and his wife have ever hatched forth—upon my soul, it is the height of absurdity!"

There was a garden seat of light iron-work upon the lawn, and he flung himself into it to enjoy his laugh with greater ease; his cousin, automatic and grave, sat down beside him and waited patiently for his hilarity to cease.

"You don't seem to see this joke as clearly as I do," said Tom. "Why, Ursula, I should have thought that you, with your shrewd common sense, would have been the first to laugh at it."

"I have had my laugh out before you came

home. You forget I have had a week to laugh in, and the jest is somewhat stale."

"Yes—yes—but, confound it, you need not look so grimly at it all, as though the joke had turned sour with brooding on it," cried Tom. "You see the nonsense of this new idea as clearly as I do?"

"Just as clearly."

"And even supposing that I was prepared to say to my father, 'Done, Sir John, I'll marry Cousin Ursula to oblige you,' you are not the girl to take me on those terms."

"What makes you think that?" was the strange, hard inquiry, in response.

The light, laughing looks of our hero vanished at this reply; he regarded her now very earnestly.

"Why should I think otherwise, knowing your high spirit, and remembering always that we have been more like enemies than friends?"

"Yes, more like enemies than friends, Tom," she replied: "I am not likely to forget it; and there is much in the past that I am not likely to forgive."

"Coming of an unforgiving race, Ursula, for the old story goes that a Dagnell never forgives."

"I have been inclined to believe that of late days," she said, thoughtfully.

"I have been inclined to doubt it," replied Tom, "for I have forgiven, and I will ask forgiveness of you for anything that rankles as an injury in your mind against me. There,

Ursula, we will begin afresh from this day. Say so."

"You are anxious to forget everything?"

"Yes, I am. This is a new outset of life, and the past is flung overboard."

"So you told Lady Dagnell."

"So I tell you," he answered; "is it a compact?"

He held his hand towards her, and she put hers within it after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, it is; and," she added, "I am glad it is!"

"That's well; that's like the cousin Ursula who first came here to make home brighter than it was—and who——"

"And who became quenched in the gloom of its surroundings."

"Ay—that was to be expected, for—but the past again. Oh! confound the past; see we put away from shore, and get from it for ever."

"Into deep water," was the dry rejoinder.

"Into hot water, if this marriage project be as strong a conceit of paterfamilias as other little crotchets of his life have been," said Tom.

"It is stronger."

"Can it be possible?"

"That is why I have come to warn you—to put you on your guard against your father and myself."

"The two of you?" exclaimed Tom. "I don't see——"

"You will, presently. But you are not patient."

"I hate beating about the bush, certainly—but go on: I am all attention," said Tom. "What

on earth do you mean by putting me on guard against Sir John and yourself?"

"Tom," she said, in the same unmoved, matter-of-fact way with which she had begun the interview, "I have told your father that when you are prepared to marry me, I am prepared to take you at your word."

"Great Heaven!—you?"

"Are you not surprised and disgusted to learn that I am prepared to say yes to the honourable offer of your hand in marriage? It is a great catch for one who has become the poor relation and dependent here," she said, mockingly.

"Do you mean to say that *you* would marry me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then, upon my soul, I do not comprehend you," he blurted forth.

"Who does at Broadlands?" was the quick answer. "Who ever did, Tom, for that matter?"

"You are really prepared to marry me, of all men! Not Marcus, who might have suited you, being older, staidier, calmer, and of more discretion; but *me*, the ne'er-do-weel, the idler, and the profligate! ME!" he repeated in a high tone of voice.

"Would it not be a fitting match?—children of two brothers—man and woman who have been brought up from childhood together, and understand each other's little foibles so well?" she said.

"You are speaking with your old biting tongue—and I hate satirical people," he said, querulously.

"Shall I speak out?"

"Yes—for God's sake, do. You were never at your best in these moods."

"Perhaps not," she answered; "but my old biting tongue, as you term it, has been, at times, the only friend on which I could depend."

"Well, well, poor Ursula, you wanted it in this house, certainly—proceed."

"Your father wishes me to marry you; it is the last wish of his heart, for he is going to die!" said Ursula Dagnell, very calmly.

"No, no, he is getting better. He thinks so himself—he says so."

"He is going to die," she repeated: "you have been sent for to soothe his dying moments."

"I am a strange man to choose for the task, Ursula," said Tom, gloomily.

"You are the one most fitting," was the reply: "you are his son, and it is a duty you are not likely to evade, being called to it as from the brink of the grave."

"I did not know it was so bad as this."

"That he should die?"

"Yes."

"It was certain from the first."

"And they all know it—and are prepared for it?"

"They are all prepared."

"They bear their troubles excellently well,"

said Tom, "and yet they have been always with him, studying his wants, and bowing to his decrees. But—why does he want me to marry you?"

"You will know presently," was the reply.

"Can't you guess?"

"He will tell you. No one else."

"Oh! that's it. I am to be father confessor as well as consoler in ordinary. Where is he?"

"Asleep. He must not be disturbed. He may sleep for hours, till night time even, and he may wake—speechless!"

"What a change in a man whose will was of iron, when I saw him five years since," said Tom.

"Five years have wrought many changes," said Ursula, sorrowfully.

"None so strange as this," said Tom. "I should not be surprised to wake up in my lodgings at Honfleur and find it all a dream."

"You do not see the change in yourself—only in him you defied."

"And who cursed me out of the house! Poor governor, I wish he were strong enough to start afresh at it."

"Horrible! Horrible!" exclaimed Ursula. "Cannot you see God's hand in this meeting?"

"I can't say I do."

"Ah! you were always a sceptic."

"I grope on darkly, and there is no hand to grasp my own and point out the way I should go," said Tom.

"As weak and as despairing as ever, then?" she asked, a little scornfully.

"I never despaired. I took life and life's sorrows too lightly for that."

"As you thought," was the dry response; "but we are forgetting our marriage, after all!"

"Yes, that's odd, considering it affects us so materially. When shall we begin to discuss the housekeeping—to buy the furniture—to settle on the manner in which a life's happiness is to be spent together?"

"Whose is the biting tongue now?" asked Ursula Dagnell, sharply.

"Not mine," exclaimed Tom; "this is pure fun."

"The time is inappropriate for pure fun," said Miss Dagnell; "pray remember the misery that is at work here, and see what you can do."

"What I can do? I am a very helpless man," said Tom.

"You have a strange task before you—to save yourself and me. Our marriage would be too great a mockery," she replied, "and if I have promised—you must refuse to promise."

"Exactly. I can do that gracefully. Even a sick man cannot suppose for a moment that I am going to marry to oblige him."

"He thinks you will wish it too."

"He is strangely sanguine over impossible contingencies," said Tom; "perhaps he has gone wholly mad, and this accounts for his sending for me, for asking my pardon, for thinking of this match."

Ursula shook her head.

"You will not find your father's brain affected," she said.

"So much the better," answered Tom. "But it is an odd story, and I have been lured home under false pretences to listen to it."

"No, he wished to see you at the last," said Ursula; "he is sorry for all the mistakes that parted you."

"He told me so this morning," said Tom, dryly, "but in what a style!"

"Did you expect sentiment and romance from him?"

"I can't say I did."

"Then rest satisfied," she answered.

"Is that possible in a man who was never satisfied?"

"It is possible to try."

"All right, I will make the attempt," said Tom: "you do not know, Ursula, with what a host of good resolutions I have come back."

"I shall be content with one," said Ursula in reply.

"Which one is that?"

"Self-restraint. Your father is dying; he has many bitter memories of you—do not add to them at the eleventh hour."

"Am I to agree with him implicitly, then?" asked our hero, with emphasis.

"You are to refuse him with kindness and gentleness—to temporise with him rather than

excite him, to reason with him calmly on the folly and impossibility of all that he desires."

"It will not be a difficult task."

"It will."

"I suppose there is some further mystery which you are hiding from me, Ursula."

"No," she said, moving slowly away from him, "I am not mysterious. You will remember my advice—you will remember that I have pledged my word, feeling sure that your consent could never be obtained, and that you would come back to save me."

"Not to enslave you—and bind you down to a sterner servitude than you have yet experienced."

"Yes, yes," she repeated; then she left him to his reverie, a strange and silent figure in the sunlight.

She had forewarned him. Was he fore-armed in consequence?

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE DINNER-TABLE.

YES, to have awakened in his old room at Honfleur would have been no surprise to Tom Dagnell; it would have been far more consistent with his surroundings than to be sitting there, in his day-dream, in his father's garden. Surely part and parcel of a dream to be at home again like this, to be conscious that he and his father had shaken hands, and that bygones were bygones for all time. A dream with much dark shadowing about, and in the mist of which strange impalpable figures were flitting full of menace and foreboding, with white arms beckoning to him, and then warning him back as from a danger or a snare lying beyond in the darkness which he could not pierce. What did it mean? What did it portend? Why this excuse of forgiveness to bring him back to Broadlands, and then tell him that he must marry Cousin Ursula? Of all women in the world, Cousin Ursula! cold-hearted, high-principled, bad-tempered, prim, and angutar Ursula, who was three or four years older than he, and would look thirteen or four-

teen presently, with those hideous glasses, and the lines coming thick and fast upon her face as lines upon a railway-map. Of all women in the world, the one with whom he had never agreed; who had spent her life in preaching at him, in advising him, in telling him what was best—who had meant well, and failed egregiously—who had been the go-between and brought hard messages from papa and mamma, who had not added to the harmony of existing things in the old days before he ran away. Of all women in the world, Ursula Dagnell!—to be offered to him by those whose poor ambitions had always galled and fretted him, who would have made a good match for him in the county when he was one and twenty, and have cut him off with a shilling had he thought of Ursula Dagnell, whom nobody seemed to care for then. Of all women in the world, Cousin Ursula! It was like marrying his own flesh and blood—he would as soon have dreamed of marrying his sister, or his grandmother, had he been blessed with either of those feminine commodities. Of all women in the world, Ursula Dagnell! It was the refrain to all his thoughts; it rang like a discordant peal of bells in his ears, dazing and confusing him; it was with him in his solitary musings in the great park into which he strayed; it followed him presently upstairs into his room—his old room—unchanged in every particular, as though the reminiscences should strike home like bayonet thrusts when he came back for

good—it was for ever echoing in his brain that day.

His small portmanteau had arrived from the railway-station, and he drew therefrom a rusty, black, full-dress suit, into which he put himself with great care, having a regard for seams and the fragile texture of the cloth. They dressed for dinner at Broadlands; they had been always very particular about dress in this establishment; he would array himself in as sumptuous a manner as the means at his command would allow. The change of attire was an improvement to him after a brisk wash and clean shave; even in an old dress-suit he looked the well-born and well-bred gentleman. The little woman whom he had met on board "The Witch," would have failed to recognise in him the rough and ready Bohemian with whom she had conversed on shipboard. Ah! the little dark girl with another mystery tacked to her—confound all mysteries! thought he. What was she doing now? he wondered. Had she reached Birmingham? had she been received by friends, relatives, or acquaintances? had she told them that she had run away? and why she had stolen off in the night from Honfleur Harbour? What was her position now? Was anybody going to marry *her* off-hand? Had she been met with a new and incomprehensible fact at her journey's end, as he had? and had it come at her like a blow? Poor little girl, more desolate than he was—who seemed to envy him and his return to home

—to whom no home-return was ever in *her* reckoning, she said—who was so strong and frank and bright. If Ursula Dagnell had been anything like her now, there would have been no insuperable difficulty in reconciling one's self to one's fate.

Yes, he wondered what Miss Hildebrandt was doing, and in what way and fashion she had begun her new life. Better than his, he trusted and believed. Strange it was that two lives should have commenced afresh last night, starting from the same point on board "The Witch," and diverging, when on English ground, so utterly and completely. Stay, let him consider this again: he was his own master; he was not quite so sure! Birmingham was not at the Antipodes.

When the dinner-bell rang for the first time he was surprised to find that he had thought more of Miss Hildebrandt than of Miss Dagnell during the last half-hour—that he had drifted away, as it were, from his thoughts of the cousin, which was a good sign, and proved that the position was not troubling his mind in any great degree. But before the dinner-bell rang a second time the mystery was upon him again, and Ursula Dagnell rose before him with her pale face and glittering glasses—a phantom that was difficult to hide from. He should be glad when this interview with his father was over, and everybody understood each other thoroughly. "The Mysteries of Udolpho" were hardly in his

line, or likely to flourish upon Sussex ground, he fancied.

It was not a cheerful dinner at which he sat down that evening: to the last day of his life he remembered the dulness and the blankness of it, the dreary voids in the conversation, the restraint and reserve which wrapped everybody in their icy folds, the consciousness that everybody was waiting and watching, and that a man was slowly dying in the room upstairs with a weight upon his mind.

The four who sat down to dinner hardly seemed to possess one thought in common; had Sir John Dagnell been lying dead in the house, there could not have been a deeper gloom cast on this small community. Lady Dagnell was indisposed, it had been officially proclaimed, and though she ate and drank well, it was as if she did it under protest, and with the inward consciousness that she was merely prolonging the misery of her existence from sheer consideration for the feelings of the family. Her head ached, and the less noise in the room under those circumstances the better; the servants stole about on tiptoe, and one who clattered the plates too roughly was requested on the spot to withdraw into the servants' hall, until he knew how to behave himself properly.

Marcus was almost as silent as his mother, and disposed to imagine that through the indiscretion of an early lunch he was ailing like his mother too. He made the most of his affliction;

he sat bolt upright and rigid, carved his fowl at arm's length, and with half-shut eyes, a patient, non-complaining, but much-suffering man, whose attention was strictly devoted to his dinner. Once or twice he glanced across at his brother, as if endeavouring to account for or to grow accustomed to this new figure at the feast, but the principal words which escaped him at the meal were a few long-drawn "Tha-anks" to the servants who waited upon him, and to whom he was gravely grateful for polite attention.

Tom Dagnell went with the stream, this slow, noiseless stream of placid monotony for which Broadlands was distinguished—being in no mood for conversation, and feeling that the shadows were thick about him, and he was not likely to grope his way too quickly from them. Let him move on with the rest of these inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow.

Ursula was there also, seated close to his side, as if by pre-arrangement, or an order from upstairs, and this made him smile a little as he took his place at table. The romance and mystery of it all verged so closely on burlesque, that he could afford to smile, even in this shadow-land, at the cool arrangements which had been made for his whole life, without in any way consulting him. Was he to be coaxed, or frightened, into marrying his prim cousin? And would Sir John Dagnell threaten him with the pains and penalties of disinheritance, if he did not say, "I, Tom, take thee, thou sober-visaged spectre,

to be my wedded wife"? As if disinheritance were not in his line; as if he had not expected it, and been prepared for it, a good five years now!

A rustling of heavy silk presently denoted that Lady Dagnell had risen to her feet with the intention of retiring to the drawing-room, and Ursula rose with her at her signal. The gentlemen stood up, the elder opened the door, closed it after the ladies, and then dawdled round to his mother's chair, into which he comfortably ensconced himself.

"Try the port, Tom," he said; "you'll find it good this evening. That old Fisher has been at the best wines again."

"Thank you, I'll stick to the claret. I have to keep my head cool," Tom replied.

"I wish I could," said Marcus; "it was awfully unwise of me to have my lunch so early. If I go out of my usual way, I'm sure to feel poorly."

"I am afraid my coming has put you all out very much."

"N-no—not very much," said Marcus, with an odd, hesitating politeness; "we expected you—you know?"

"Yes—I was sent for."

"Exactly."

"Have they told you for what reason, Marcus?" said our hero, leaning across the table, and regarding his brother intently.

"Ye-es, I have a faint idea—we all have a faint idea of what the governor's wishes are," was the reply.

"But not what mine are, I take it."

"Of course not. It is simply for you to say what you think of the proposition, and to decide accordingly. It is not my affair, Tom, so I don't worry myself about it."

"You might as well have done so."

Marcus Dagnell elevated his eyebrows in surprise at this remark.

"Why?" he ventured to inquire.

"Because you can stand a great deal of worry, being blessed with equanimity and a slow circulation of the blood."

"Upon my honour, Tom, I fail to comprehend you, all at once," drawled Marcus; "if you are chaffing a fellow, I wish you would say so."

"These are days of sober, serious earnest, man, and if you had pulled yourself together, and taken an interest in my future, you might have been able to throw some light upon this wretched complication," said Tom, irritably.

"I don't think so; I really don't, upon my honour," was Marcus's reply. "The governor never took me into his confidence, and I don't suppose he ever will. I can't get on comfortably with the governor: he loses his temper so confoundedly that it's painful to have anything to do with him. It is positively, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know," said Tom, gloomily.

"It's particularly odd, but the less the governor sees of me the more peaceable and quiet he is."

"That is odd, perhaps," said Tom, after a

moment's consideration of the problem, "for you are a man who should agree with most folk."

"That's exactly my notion. I hate bother and fuss; it floors me if there's much of that. I'm not constituted for it."

"Why didn't they knock up a match between you and Ursula? You two would have suited each other admirably," cried his brother.

"I don't see it, Tom—upon my word, I don't see that."

"You are both quiet and grave dummies enough, the Lord knows," said Tom, "and you could have sat one on each side of the fire, and waited patiently for doomsday."

"I don't like a quiet woman myself. I prefer a girl with life and animation and 'go' in her," Marcus remarked.

"The devil you do," said Tom, astonished. "I should not have thought that."

"It's a fact, I assure you. I think a dull sort of girl, all prudence, propriety, and prayer-book, an awful bore. I do indeed."

"I wonder what a woman all life, and soul, and 'go,' would think of Marcus Dagnell?" said Tom, laughing out at last.

"Women like quiet men best, there's very little doubt about that."

"All sorts of women for all sorts of men," answered Tom: "there's no rule in the matter, and it's no use issuing one from Broadlands. And looking at you critically, *mon frère*, and knowing that you were here, ready to hand,

lamb-like and tractable, I am more puzzled than ever to account for the reason why you and Ursula did not make a match of it."

"Are you really?" said Marcus, very slowly. "You are not chaffing me?"

"Not at all. Why did they send for me? Why bring back to the house the firebrand that was always threatening to destroy it—the man who was never obedient, who was self-willed and obstinate before he was a man, and who is the least likely to marry the woman of another's choosing?"

"Ye-es, ye-es, I know all that, Tom. I understand perfectly, so you need not hammer away on the table with the nut-crackers any longer," answered Marcus; "it makes a terrible row, and I think I told you that my head was bad this evening."

"You have spoken of nothing but your head," said Tom, peevishly.

"As for my marrying Ursula, the whole thing was out of the question, Tom," said Marcus. "She's a good girl, and will make an exceptionally good wife; but I couldn't marry her if they had wished it ever so much—which I must say they didn't. I'm half-married already, you know."

"No, I don't know," said Tom. "What do you mean?"

"I'm engaged to be married; I am decisively and positively booked, Tom, and there's no backing out of the contract."

"Who's the happy lady?" asked his brother.

"Miss Oliver."

"Oliver!" exclaimed Tom. "You don't mean Fanny Oliver?"

"Yes, I do."

"The little girl you were spoons on, six or seven years ago, and who used to tease you so terribly, and call you Slowboy?"

"She still calls me Slowboy, Tom."

"Why, there was a row about her. They were afraid you might get engaged off-hand, and—but—Marcus——"

"What's the matter? What are you staring at a fellow like that for? Is there anything over my head anywhere?"

"Sir John and my lady used to look down upon the Olivers—they were not as genteel as the Dagnells, who had made money and got a knighthood out of a City banquet to a foreign ruffian with a crown on, — the Olivers were low-class then, and not doing well—terribly vulgar, Marcus. How is it you have conquered the family dislike?"

"Ah! you haven't heard about the Olivers."

"Not a word—since poor Fanny was packed off to boarding-school, and you were sent to college. What of the Olivers?" he asked.

"They went to Birmingham, and old Oliver made a fortune out of dish-covers. You have heard of Oliver's Patent Dish-Covers, at all events?"

"I have been living abroad, and the fame of the dish-cover has not reached me."

"I'll tell you of it another time, when I haven't such a splitting headache," said Marcus. "I wonder if potass-water would do me any good, or make me sick?"

"Tell me of Miss Oliver then."

"I met her in town last year," said Marcus. "I went down to her father's house in Birmingham, by invitation afterwards—a big place, with a fine crop of pictures on the walls, too. I proposed, was accepted, and the wedding will come off in the autumn," said Marcus.

"And what kind of young lady has Fanny Oliver bloomed into?"

Marcus laid his hand confidentially on his brother's arm, and his face gathered slowly some vestige of expression to it.

"She's a perfect clipper," he asserted.

"Good. So Marcus Dagnell marries a perfect clipper, and his brother Tom is asked to become the bridegroom-elect to a perfect—saint!" cried Tom. "Yes, the philosopher was right. 'Life is a merry-go-round!' Shall we join the ladies?"

"With pleasure," said Marcus.

"They'll be dull without us," was Tom's caustic comment here, as they went together from the dining-room.

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER DINNER.

LADY DAGNELL and Ursula, her niece by marriage, *had* been somewhat dull in the absence of the gentlemen; although, judging by the thoughtful dinner-party, it was possible to believe that even the male presence would not have conduced to any great degree of exhilaration. Still the ladies were more than ordinarily dull, or more than ordinarily indifferent to each other's company. Lady Dagnell was pleased to consider that she was unwell, and hence we may not see her in her best moods on the present occasion. She was "faint and weary," and was afflicted that particular evening with a desire for fresh air, and for the windows to be opened to their fullest extent to admit it, which, being a March wind, was a trifle too fresh and boisterous for the occasion.

"If I do not have air I shall die," she was in the habit of protesting to her son Marcus, who had a horror of draughts, and was ever beset by the dread of catching cold, and Marcus had been more than once doubtful if closed windows



and shut doors would not have offered some little consolation to him, even for his mother's premature decease.

Ursula Dagnell was not in the mood either for the keen breeze, which swayed the curtains, and blew the flames of the wax candles aside. She was cowering away from it in an angle of the room, and bending over an open volume in her hand. It was thus the gentlemen found the ladies after dinner.

"Gracious me, what a dreadful draught!" said Marcus, as he entered. "Tom, you don't like this kind of breeze?"

"I don't object," replied Tom.

"Your brother is not of so fragile a material that he is likely to be blown away," said Lady Dagnell; "but you can shut most of the windows, if you like. Leave me this one, if you have any charity."

"Very well, mamma; but I can't help fancying you'll catch an influenza," said Marcus, as he walked from one window to another, and shut them with great care, after which he sat down by the scanty fire, which had been allowed to consume itself in the steel grate, and thrust both hands into his pockets.

"You are not going to sleep, Marcus—your brother must be entertained in some way."

"I was not thinking of sleep, Lady Dagnell," replied Marcus. "I was just wondering why Biffin had not brought the tea in."

"We have been waiting for you," said his mother. "Ursula, may I trouble you to ring?"

Ursula was close to the bell. She rang without looking up from the book. She did not look up, even when her cousin Tom was close to her side, and steadily regarding the parting in her light brown hair.

"What is the interesting volume, Ursula?"

Ursula closed it at this inquiry, and put on her glasses for a longer range of vision.

"I don't know," she said, calmly; "a drawing-room book of some kind—a picture-book. I was not interested in it."

Tom Dagnell thought this curious, but he made no comment.

"Who is with my father?"

"The nurse. She takes my place when my uncle is asleep. He will send for me the instant he is conscious."

"How fond he has become of you," Tom remarked.

"You are astonished at his fondness?" she inquired, "at his confidence and trust in me?"

"A little," Tom confessed. "In the old days, I don't think he showed you any particular affection."

"He did not," was the deliberate reply.

"But then he did not show anybody much of that commodity—not even," he added, lowering his voice, "Lady Dagnell."

"Did she ever show much affection for him?" said Ursula, quickly.

"I never saw any," answered Tom, with a short laugh; "they were a queer couple—is it very remarkable that they are blessed with queer children?"

"Not very remarkable—and yet the children take not after father or mother."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I am sure of it," she repeated.

"Theirs has not been a happy marriage," said Tom, in a low voice. "They have never understood how to make home, children, or themselves happy, and yet they—for I suppose my mother is at the bottom of this notion—would teach us happiness by their unwisdom."

"You misjudge your mother," said Ursula: "she does not wish us to be married. She is not so unwise as that."

"Indeed!"

"She sees as clearly as you do—as I do—what a mistake it would be," Ursula continued. "How you would despise and hate me for being a clog on your life—how I should despise and hate you for thinking me to be so!"

"Well, it has not come to clogs," said Tom, smiling, "not even to old slippers to be flung after our post-chaise."

Ursula resented his lightness by a cold stare.

"Had not you better talk to your mother?" she said. "She has scarcely had the honour of a dozen words since your return."

"They have been more than sufficient for her, I am afraid. Ah! poor mother, I wonder why

Heaven blessed her with another son," said Tom, as he took his cousin's hint and crossed to Lady Dagnell's side.

"They are an astonishing time about that tea," murmured Marcus, now fairly half asleep, and speaking with his eyes shut. "I should not be very much surprised if something had gone wrong with the kettle. I shouldn't—oh, here it is at last—no, by Jove, it's only the Gamp!"

A stout, middle-aged woman opened the door, and stood in the doorway.

"I am wanted," said Ursula, rising at the sight of her.

"No, Miss Dagnell," said the nurse, "if you please, you are not."

"Is Sir John still asleep?" asked Lady Dagnell.

"He has woke up at last, my lady—but he wishes to see Mr. Thomas directly."

"But—" began Ursula.

"And if you please, Miss Dagnell, I was to say that he would not see any one else, and that you were to make sure he was not troubled by any one else's intrusion whilst his son was with him."

"I will go to him at once," said Tom.

"You will remember he is greatly changed, and very weak," said Ursula, solicitously.

"I will not forget your warning, cousin; I am not likely to forget it."

"And that, under any circumstances," added Lady Dagnell, by way of postscript, "violent conduct, or language, will distress him very much."

"I wouldn't bully the old gentleman for five pounds," said Tom, very flippantly, at this; "trust to my discretion, and—*au revoir*."

"He has not altered in the least," said Lady Dagnell, as the door closed behind him; "the same careless, callous being that he ever was. Five years of adversity have not done him any good."

"I do not think they have done him any harm," replied Ursula.

"How can you tell, Miss Dagnell? Why should you know better than I?" asked the elder woman, impetuously; "haven't I my wits about me? have I not studied the world, and known the world, much longer than yourself? This is not the age of miracles, to turn an undutiful son like him into an obedient child."

"Or a woman like Lady Dagnell into a loving mother," muttered Ursula to herself.

Lady Dagnell, having found her tongue, now gave free vent to her complaints, and forgot how indisposed she was. She was by nature a fretful and intolerant woman, whom nothing pleased in this world. There are not many like her scattered about, perhaps, but this was one of them, and a very marked specimen indeed. Everybody knew it at Broadlands: the family, the servants, the tradesfolk of Littlehampton; she almost knew it herself—she had been told of it so often by a plain-speaking husband, and a niece who was also not slow to express an opinion, if it were necessary.

Lady Dagnell launched forth, but no one essayed to contradict her on this occasion—no one listened even. It was a long, drawn-out protest, a miserable monotone of her wrongs and indignities, her own greatness and importance, her virtues, and everybody else's vices, her cleverness and everybody else's dulness of perception; and Miss Dagnell took refuge in her book, and Marcus in his dreams, until the tea was brought into the room.

After tea, Marcus stood upon the harth-rug and suggested that the one window remaining open would be better closed, as he felt a burning in his throat—a remark to which his mother responded by her old cry, "I must have air; I cannot be stifled, Marcus, this hot night, to please your selfishness."

"It's a mere suggestion, mamma," said Marcus: "I was thinking more of your health than my own, upon my honour."

He subsided into his chair again until he began to cough, when he rose once more and went out of the room in four long strides. The family at Broadlands saw no more of him that evening.

Left to themselves, the ladies hardly made the best of their position. Lady Dagnell, tired out with her soliloquy, dozed off in her blue satin chair; and the plain little woman with the glasses rose and passed noiselessly from her place into the seat recently vacated by the elder son, and sat before the fire, with a steady

stare at the flickering red coal. Quiet and grave, stern and self-repressive as one might say Ursula Dagnell was, she was scarcely herself that evening, and would have been a subject for much speculation in the minds of those who considered that they knew her thoroughly. Cold and imperturbable on ordinary occasions as she might be—a feminine shadow of her cousin Marcus, perhaps—she was not herself that night. But then it was *not* an ordinary occasion—there was the finger of Fate in it, pointing at her from the gap in the dark heavens, which were lowering above her head. She seemed to cower from it already; to sit there bowed down as by a great grief, or a terrible suspense against which even her stoicism had given way completely. The woman sleeping by the open window would not have dreamed of that storm-stricken figure by the fire, a figure weeping silently, struggling hard to weep silently, with shaking hands pressed down upon the bosom to keep the heavy sobs down; with lips parted, breath short and quick, and grey eyes ablaze with their own flame. A young woman in darkness of mind, and borne down by incertitude, waiting there in fear and trembling, as at a great crisis of her life.

Presently in that big, silent house footsteps were heard descending the stairs—*his* footsteps. Ursula Dagnell knew their quick, impetuous tread, though they had not rung in her ears for five long years. She dashed the tears from her

eyes, put on her glasses hastily, and was sitting pale and still enough, when the door opened and he came in, looking like a ghost. Ursula drew a long breath at sight of him, but he did not heed it—probably did not perceive it, in his own excitement. The mother opened her eyes as he entered, but he did not notice her. He went straight to the side of his cousin, and held out both his hands.

"Ursula," he said, "I ask you to become my wife. Will you have me for your husband?"

CHAPTER X.

THE OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

URSULA DAGNELL half rose in her chair, and then sank back again, lacking the strength to stand. All colour deserted her, and she lay there very still for a while.

"Water, mother; she has fainted!" Tom exclaimed.

"No, no," murmured Ursula; "let me rest quietly, an instant, a single instant, please. I shall be well and strong soon."

There ensued an interval that was painful to count by their heart-beats, until Lady Dagnell rose from her chair by the open window and moved towards the door.

"I am *de trop*," she said, wearily. "I had better leave you together."

"Will you see Sir John before you retire, mother?" inquired her son as he opened the drawing-room door for her to pass out. "I think he would be glad to speak with you."

"I have not the nerve to-night," replied Lady Dagnell. "If I am better to-morrow, I will try to see him. I am not fit for anything just now; I am really very weak."

"Good night, then," answered Tom. He closed the door and went back to the side of Ursula. His cousin had had time to recover that self-command upon which she had always plumed herself; it was the grave, immobile face of old, into which he peered on his return to her.

"You heard what I said, Ursula," he commenced anew: "have you the courage to become my wife, and make a better man of me?"

"You have the courage, then, to ask me?" she rejoined.

"Does it require any great amount of resolution?"

"In the face of to-day's warning—of my prophecy of much misery in store for us—of the assurance in your own heart that I was the last woman you would ever think of marrying," she said, in a constrained voice, "you come to me like this?"

"I come to you a changed man—with my heart full and open, and the scales fallen from my eyes," said Tom.

"But with no love in that heart, and with never admiration in those eyes for me. Never that, despite it all!" she cried, with more animation in her words and gestures.

"How long will it take to love my cousin Ursula, now that I know how true and forgiving a woman she is?" he asked—"now that I read her character aright for the first time in my life, and am ready with all my strength to do it reverence."

"I am so difficult to love," she murmured, as he took a seat beside her. "I have so many faults—I am growing older and uglier every day—I shall be ever the millstone round your neck."

"But still round my neck! always loving and true. Is not that the position?" cried Tom.

"Tell me first, what has your father said?" she asked curiously.

"I have promised him that——"

"Stop. What secret there may be between you and him, and with which I may be connected, I do not care to learn—and I am the last to ask you to divulge it," she said, hurriedly, "but you must tell me about myself. What has he said to make you come to me like this?"

"You did not expect I should come?"

Ursula shook her head sadly.

"I did not expect it," she replied.

"I had misjudged you all my life so terribly, Ursula," he said; "even my father had been mistaken in you, till his illness showed him how good a woman you were. Why, you have tried as hard to hide the natural sweetness of your heart as others would have done to display the passing virtues they possessed. You have been always and ever my true friend."

"Ay, Tom, if I have tried with all my strength at anything, if I have offered with all my soul one honest supplication to my God, it has been in your cause, and in the hope of your return," she cried, passionately now; "my life has been spent in hiding this from those about me, and

in ever and always deceiving you, but I loved you all the while, Tom. I loved you as no other woman has loved a man, I think! I have fought so hard to be of service to you. I would die so readily to save you from one atom's worth of trouble!"

It was all out at last, this deep, passionate nature, which had been so long repressed, and clamped with iron bands about her heart, and which had eaten into her like a disease that, unable to escape the body, must perforce destroy it. The quiet, grave, undemonstrative girl, having once thrown back the flood-gates, was more extravagant in her demeanour than women more variable and hysterical would have been, under similar circumstances. She wept, she raved, she paced the room in her excitement; finally she stole into his arms as for the shelter of them against her own wild self, slipping through them the instant afterwards, and cowering at his feet with arms folded before her face.

"What can you think of me, now I have owned how weak I am, and how much I have thought of you? What can you think? Oh! my God, what *do* you think?"

"I think of the time wasted in which we have not understood each other, Ursula," said Tom, gently; "there, there, dry your eyes, and let us talk reasonably now. This is almost play-acting between two beings who have scoffed at anything like sentiment until to-night."

"We were play-acting before, perhaps," said Ursula.

"Upon my honour, I think we were; but it was always difficult in this house to let the sympathies have a fair chance."

"Ah, yes," said Ursula, with a sigh.

They had changed positions again, and were sitting by the open window, looking out at the dark landscape. Ursula had complained of the heat and of faintness, and had been led there by her attentive cousin.

"This has been a day of strange events, Tom," said Ursula, with a faint smile.

"A day of reckoning, with the sum-total on the right side at last," he answered; "but you have not answered my question yet, Ursula."

"What question?" she said, timidly.

"Will you consider me as your future husband?"

Again she hesitated, looking at him with a strange intentness, that was hard to confront without flinching. Again she responded, but with all the love in her heart too evident.

"If I were sure that in any way I could make you happy, Tom—that in time, and even after we were married, there would grow up in you by degrees a fair affection for me, I should not be slow in giving you my answer; but, you know, I am a Dagnell," she said; "consequently I am proud and obstinate. I should not care to be married out of pity, or to see you afterwards indifferent and cold, the victim of an impulse of which you had repented."

"You warned me this afternoon—you warn me again," said Tom; "but, Ursula, I shall love you very dearly. I love you now—I do indeed!"

"You are as hasty as ever. You have heard strange truths, and they have coloured your fancy, and set me in too bright a light. It will all die out—it will all fade," she said, with her lips quivering painfully; "the twilight, and then the night will follow, leaving *that* as the end of it."

She pointed to the darkness without, where the wind was moaning amongst the restless leaves of the tall trees, and the sky lowering beyond, black and starless.

"Have you so little trust in me?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied, feebly. "You have done nothing to render me distrustful. I have often felt, in old days, that I might be your guide and counsellor; but I was conceited then, and you looked on me as a spy."

"We have done with the past, Ursula—there is the future lying before us! Trust me, cousin, as I know I can trust you."

There was no ready answer yet, despite the new lover's earnestness. Ursula Dagnell, even in her strong affection, was prudent and watchful.

"You have been away five years—your own master—you must have seen some one to love very deeply in that time," she murmured.

"No."

"You are naturally of an affectionate dispo-

sition, Tom," she continued, "and easily impressed. You would return love for love to any girl, if she let you see as clearly into her heart as I have shown you mine. You would mistake gratitude for love, at any time."

"The girls I have met abroad have been pert and ugly, and have worn wooden shoes. There has not been the ghost of one with even the ghost of an idea of loving me."

"Not one?" she said, still doubtfully. It seemed wholly impossible to her that the women would be likely to leave Tom Dagnell alone; it was so extremely natural that they should set their caps at him—all of them!

"Not one," he said again. "I repeat, not the ghost of one."

"It is very strange, in five long years," she replied, "is it not?"

"I have been too busy; I have been fighting too hard for a living to think of the ladies. I was never a lady's man," said Tom.

"I am glad of that," she said, with a great sigh of relief.

"I haven't seen a face that has given me a second thought—hardly any that has given me a second thought," he said, correcting himself.

Women who love deeply are strangely quick to seize upon the weak points of a man's defence.

"What face have you almost thought twice about, then?" asked Ursula at once. "Ah! there was one?"

"Not in all the five years till this morning,"

was the reply, "and that belonged to a passenger on board ship, who was crossing from Honfleur to Littlehampton."

"Did you speak to her, then?"

"We exchanged a few words of common civility."

"Was she a lady?"

"Certainly. A lady in distress, probably, for she was leaving home in great haste."

"For what reason?"

"She did not give me any reason."

"If she were sufficiently communicative to tell you that she was leaving home precipitately, she might have imparted to you some further information," said Ursula, slowly. "Ladies grow rapidly confidential at times, when gentlemen are their listeners. They——but I am a fool, Tom——you see that clearly enough—a jealous, suspecting fool, who would grow quickly angry over a few chance words between you and any woman now. For you have asked me to become your wife, and till I say yes or no——till I have made up my mind——you seem to belong to me."

"And when will you have made up your mind?" he inquired. "When shall I hear your decision?"

"Now."

It was her turn to extend both hands to him. The eyes were brimming over with tears, through which she looked at him. He held her hands in his and waited for her answer.

"I know I am not fit for you," she said, "that I am a stranger woman than you fancy—that I

may even make you very miserable. But there is no happiness in life without you, and I am very selfish. Take me to your heart, Tom, and love me all that you can!"

He stooped and kissed her as a pledge of their new troth—they were engaged to be married from that hour; the compact was signed and sealed in both their hearts, and Tom Dagnell had come to Broadlands to find a wife awaiting him. So, with the dark night for a background, these two shook hands over their bargain.

"Of all women in the world, Ursula Dagnell!" he had cried, in his hot, rebellious spirit, only a few hours before.

CHAPTER XI.

A WEIGHT OFF HIS MIND.

THE hour was somewhat late to intrude upon a sick man's rest, but Tom Dagnell and his cousin went softly upstairs together to Sir John's apartment. Tom had promised that he would bring Ursula, when it had all been settled between them, and that hand in hand they would convey the good news to Sir John, and ask his blessing on their betrothal.

Outside the door, Ursula stopped.

"We are all changing so rapidly, or setting aside our masks so completely, that I may ask you now, Tom, to be your natural self," she said.

"Haven't I been?" he inquired.

"No, it has been play-acting, as you term it, with the younger son in a character unsuited to him."

"You are an observant little woman, whom nothing seems to escape," said Tom. "Well, what have you seen?"

"An unreal, spasmodic, suspicious Tom Dagnell," replied Ursula.

"I have been on my guard certainly," Tom

confessed: "I have been distrustful of all of you, and consequently harsh and disagreeable."

"And as unlike your true self as winter is to summer."

"Thank you for the compliment," he said, kissing her as if by right of conquest now. "See, how I punish the flatterer. Well, yes; I have been trying hard to be nasty all day, and to say unpleasant things, to show that I had come back with no intention of being bounced over like a new boy at a boarding-school. But it was all bounce. You shall see the old Tom Dagnell to-morrow."

"As you were before the old mistakes," she said.

"Yes, I will obey the word of my superior officer. 'As you were!'"

"I am very glad, Tom," she said, pressing his hand. Then they tapped gently on the panels of the door, and waited for admittance. The stout nurse was quick to respond to the summons, and admit the affianced pair into the room. Tom and Ursula, hand in hand, went over the soft carpet and round the great lacquered screen to the side of the sick man, sitting in the red light of the fire, in the same position as our hero had beheld him at an earlier hour of that never-to-be-forgotten day.

"It is arranged, then," Sir John Dagnell said, with a wistful look towards Ursula.

"I have promised to be Tom's wife," was Ursula's brief answer.

"I am very glad," he said. "With this load off my mind I shall be better now. I shall get rapidly better from to-night."

"I hope you will, father."

"Mine is belief, not a hope. What's the use of hope," muttered Sir John, "save to encourage fallacies?"

"And tell flattering tales, as the poet says," replied his son; "but still, Sir John, I trust to see you well and strong again."

"Ursula prays for me every night, don't you, Ursula?"

"Yes."

"Though it doesn't seem to have any effect," he added.

"Do you pray yourself?" asked Tom, curiously.

"Of course. I pray hard for my old health and strength."

"And for forgiveness for the past, uncle, should it be in His wise will that health and strength should not return," said Ursula, earnestly: "you pray for that, you promised me you would."

He seemed to cower from her as she rested her hands upon the chair and looked into his face.

"Yes, yes," he said; "but I want to forget the past, and when you are praying about it continually, it's an infernally hard job."

"Sir John, Sir John!" cried Ursula, reprov-
ingly.

"Ay, but it is," Sir John continued; "it's a perfect nuisance, however necessary it may be."

And if you have forgiven me, Ursula—and Tom too—why, the whole affair is settled, to my thinking. But there, you haven't both come to worry me."

"Heaven forbid," said Ursula.

"You have come to say that you are happy—so far as fretting about me will allow?" asked Sir John.

"I am happier than I have been in all my life," Ursula confessed. "I have brought a son back to you, and I am understood at last."

"There can be no further misunderstanding, Ursula," said Tom: "we both know you are the most unselfish of women."

Ursula shook her head in deprecation.

"No, no," she said: "I am selfish in accepting you. I am terribly selfish."

"Tom could not have a better wife," remarked the father.

"Yes, yes," replied Ursula, in haste, "a better, brighter, prettier, and younger woman. I see all that, I know all that, but there stands no one in the way between us, uncle, and there can never be a living soul to love him so dearly as myself,—never, in all the world!"

She took Tom's hand and raised it to her lips before he was aware, but there was no thrill of love in him that was responsive to her impulse. He was surprised, and saddened even; there had not seemed a dog to love him twenty-four hours since, and now, here was a woman disposed to make an idol of him, and to be

extravagant in her adoration. He had not mastered the position yet, or settled down to it—it was like a dream still. Patience, he should be himself in time.

“You will sit up with me to-night, Tom,” said the father; “I like some one to talk to me when I wake.”

“Tom has come a long journey,” suggested Ursula.

“Not at all,” said Tom; “I am at your service, Sir John, and not tired in the least.”

“That old woman can go to her room,” said Sir John, pointing to the nurse; “I hate the sight of her.”

“But you will go to bed as usual,” suggested Ursula.

“Yes, presently,” he replied, “when I am tired; but I sleep more comfortably in the big chair—I feel less choking in it.”

“You complain of dreaming badly in it too,” said Ursula.

“I dream badly everywhere. It’s devilish hard to be troubled by such dreams as mine, and without any sense in them.”

“You can laugh at them when you are awake,” said his son.

“Oh, yes, I am in fine laughing trim then,” replied Sir John, satirically—“after going head first down a precipice, or falling under a railway train, or having my throat cut by you or your mother—or Marcus, sometimes, by way of a change—I wake up fit to die of laughing, of course.”

"You slept well in your bed last night," Ursula remarked to the sick man.

"About as well as I could, with you walking up and down like a ghost, all the time."

"Ah, I was unsettled," said Ursula; "Tom was coming home, and I wondered what would happen afterwards."

She smiled across at Tom, as from the safe side of the happy land to which they had steered their course, and Tom returned the smile. How quickly he should learn to love Ursula Dagnell! He was sure of it. She was the only one who had ever cared or sorrowed for him!

"I don't fancy I slept very well last night," said Sir John, "and as for dreams—was not that the night I was going to be hanged?"

"It was the night before."

"Well, I slept in bed *that* night," said Sir John, "and there was the scaffold, and the crowd, and the hangman, and the rope round my neck, all perfect. When I was sheriff I used to see the hanging business done sometimes. Ugh! I felt the rope, Tom. I was choking with it; and what do you think was the cause? That cursed old fat woman had let me fall asleep with my head out of bed. You know you did!" he screamed at his nurse, who suddenly rose to urge a protest.

"You shifted, Sir John," she said, "before I was aware of it. It was no fault of mine. I know my duty well. I am a duly certificated——"

"Ursula, stop her, or I shall swear," exclaimed

the knight: "send her out of the room, and leave me with my own flesh and blood, and not with a hireling like that."

"I am not to be reprovèd," said the nurse, haughtily; "I am a duly certificated——"

"Yes, yes, we know you are, and we are glad of it," said Ursula, soothingly, "but Sir John is somewhat irritable to-night."

"And I make allowance for it," replied the nurse; "I always do. I have lived in the best of families—the irritablest of families—but I have never been called a cursed old fat woman before. He's very trying and unbearable, Miss Dagnell; he gets worse and worse."

Ursula and the weeping nurse passed into the adjoining room, and Sir John composed himself as well as he was able in his chair.

"That hyena goes to-morrow," he said: "I have had enough of *her*."

"She appears to me a respectable, willing kind of woman," remarked Tom.

"That is because you know nothing about her," said the father. "She is the worst of the whole score we have had down here—all duly certificated, too, and be damned to them."

"Well, she is gone, and you must try and rest, father; the night is growing late."

"You want to rest yourself, you mean?" was the reply.

"No; I can do almost without rest. An hour's sleep always pulls me round."

"You are not going to snore here for an

hour, I hope?" said Sir John, somewhat alarmed at this statement.

"Oh! no."

"Because I would rather have Ursula here, if that's your idea. Ah!" he said, with a sigh, "I am used to Ursula—she is the only one who understands my disorder—who is gentle and kind——"

"And forgiving," added Tom.

"And forgiving—yes. And no fool, either, Tom."

"A wise woman, I should have thought, had it not been a great mistake of hers to care for me," Tom remarked, as he sat down before the fire.

"Yes; that is a bit of a mistake," said the father, thoughtfully.

"There's no making out a woman when there's a man in question," Tom continued; "philosophy's out of gear, and 'it's a mad world, my masters,' altogether."

"You seem to have settled it to your own satisfaction pretty well," said the querulous father.

"But still she is a wise woman—shrewd and far-seeing."

"Ay, awfully shrewd, and seeing to the very end of things," muttered Sir John, opening and shutting his fingers strangely as his hands rested on the sides of his chair, and his eyes glared at the hollow burning coals: "she has been too much for me, God knows!"

There was something in the tone of the father's voice that aroused Tom's interest, but his father had forgotten his presence, and was disposed to ramble in his speech. He was weak and variable, this man with whom there had been such bitter quarrels in the hey-day of his strength and in the strong days of his injustice. Poor father, he forgave him all wrongs and misconceptions now, and was glad to be at his side again, and at the last like this!

It was Ursula's return that distracted Tom's attention, but failed to divert the knight's.

"I wish he would go to his room for the night," said Ursula, in a whisper. "Try to persuade him presently."

"He is hard to persuade still, I find."

"At times," was the reply; "not always. The electric bell in the wall summons the nurse."

"I see," said Tom. "And now, good night, Ursula; you are tired, I am sure."

"Good night, Tom," she replied; "I shall be glad to rest, and think of this again; and if it is for the best."

"Why, we have settled that," he said, laughing.

"Life is beginning, not ending, for us," she answered, shaking her head; "we drop the curtain on the first act, that is all."

Tom started at the simile—it was inappropriate on the lips of a recluse, and it was a stagey expression at the best. They were strangely like his own words, too—his own prophecy. He

had told Miss Hildebrandt on board "The Witch" that this was the end of the first act; and now Ursula Dagnell agreed with him. But the second act—what was that to be? Was his father looking at it now with that far-away stare in his glazed eyes?

"You will bid him good night, Ursula?" said Tom.

"He would not hear me—it would only disturb him," was the reply. "He will look like that for a while, and then drop off to sleep. You must not mind his dreams, or what he says in them, Tom."

"Not I."

"You are not a nervous man."

"Not a bit."

"If he become excited, a few drops from that phial on the mantel-piece will calm him when he wakes. Good night again," she said. "You will find your own room ready when Sir John is tired of your attendance."

"Thank you. Good night, Ursula. God bless you!"

"No—no—God bless you, Tom," she answered, as she went swiftly and noiselessly from the room, leaving father and son together.

CHAPTER XII.

NO REST YET.

IF this were Sir John Dagnell's customary method of composing himself for sleep, it was somewhat of an unpleasant order of going for any one to observe too closely. A deep turn of thought had "fixed" the knight; turned him as it were into a statue, in whose marble face glittered two bright glaring eyes. Was it the past or the future that had the power to subdue thus completely the man who had been so irritable and harsh only a few minutes since, or was it all part and parcel of the disease which was bearing him, by slow degrees, to the world apart from this? It was singular to observe the suddenness with which Sir John Dagnell had passed away from all consciousness of his surroundings, from the knowledge of his son sitting there, of Ursula having re-entered, spoken of him and bidden Tom good night, from the thought of the present hour and the deep consideration even of his own afflictions—that soul-absorbing thought by which he was for ever burdened in his wakeful moments.

Tom Dagnell sat and watched his father closely.

There was a world of thoughts to keep the son wakeful; it had been altogether so eventful a day that his brain was heated still with contemplation of it. He had had such different ideas only twenty-four hours ago; knowing what his father's disposition was, and what a stern and unforgiving man he had always been. He had come to England doubting of any peace between them even at the eleventh hour—and yet it had come, and something more than peace.

After all, was it peace to the figure in the chair?—was it ever to come to a man whose life had been marked by much injustice, and who, that very day, had owned to the son what a miserable sinner he had been? Was he thinking of it still?—was it troubling his mind?—were the dream-figures of which he had complained rising up before him?

“This has been an unlucky house, Tom—always a house with a black blight upon it,” said Sir John, so clearly and precisely that the son leaned forward, thinking that his father had awakened. But the eyes were fixed and staring, and the face was set and corpse-like.

“We have brushed the blight away for good,” muttered Tom, in a low tone, so that his father might catch the answer, if he needed one, and dream on undisturbed, if sleep were heavy with him.

The father did not hear him. The eyelids closed slowly over the eyes, and the breathing became more regular. There were to ensue no

troubled dreams for Sir John Dagnell that night, Tom hoped, and the son might drop off presently to sleep upon his own account. The time-piece on the mantel-shelf ticked on quickly and busily, and Tom Dagnell's brain cooled by degrees until there was a semblance of unconsciousness upon him, a faint doubt upon his mind as to whether he were sitting in his father's room, or curled up against the paddle-box of "The Witch" steamer, out of the way of the wind and sea spray, with Ursula for his fellow-passenger, not the dark young beauty of the name of Hildebrandt.

"HILDEBRANDT!"

Tom came to himself with an odd plunge forward, like a man startled from repose by some one shouting at him. He sat up and looked towards his father, certain almost that a name had been called aloud which was not strange to him, and that Sir John had given utterance to it.

The thought that had crossed him in his half-sleep could not have magnified itself to sound unless he had shouted forth the name himself, and was too stupid to remember it. His father was in the same passive condition; he had not moved during the last half hour scored against his life—against all lives—and he would have exhibited some sure sign of distress or excitement, if he had spoken up in that shrill key. And yet some one must have broken the stillness of the room, for the shade over the clock was ringing like a bell, the glass vibrating as

it were in unison. Perhaps that was fancy too, or a singing in his ears, thought Tom, the instant afterwards. He was full of fancies, to make amends for the hard facts of the last four and twenty hours, for he could imagine the door was opening, and the cold air stealing in from the corridor without. He knew that he had not risen to draw the curtains over the door, and that that might account for the change of temperature, but he tilted himself back in his chair, so that he could look round the lacquered screen, and make sure that he was wrong in one particular, at least. By Jove! he was right, for the door *was* wide open, and the blackness of the corridor was beyond it. That was his cousin Ursula's error, and an uncommon one in so careful and methodical a woman—she had forgotten to close the door securely after bidding him good night. To think it was open after all, and that his perceptive faculties were so admirably acute! He walked softly out of the room, and peered up and down the corridor, where an oil lamp was burning very dimly at the further end, near the great staircase which led into the hall. There was the rustling of a dress, too, as of some one going down the stairs, or else he was mistaken again. It was to his mind, at least, singularly audible at that hour of the night. He made one step along the corridor, then paused.

Well, it was no business of his. The nurse had forgotten a spoon, or a bundle of firewood, perhaps, and it would not do to quit his father

in order to inquire why people were flitting about the passages that night. His father might wake up at the very instant, and think himself deserted; let those roam about the house who wished: he should know the motive in the morning. He closed the door, and pulled the curtains across it, free from any excitement over a commonplace matter for which there might be a hundred reasons, and then he paused again, with his hand upon the drapery. Carefully as he had proceeded, the rings upon the curtain-rod had jingled softly, and disturbed the sick man. He was speaking now—the voice came from behind the screen, and was, without a doubt, his father's voice.

"Hildebrandt, we must have mercy. Don't you hear me—won't you hear me? *Hildebrandt!*" shouted Sir John Dagnell.

Tom strode to his father's side. Sir John was awake, and panting frightfully. His claw-like hands were clutching at his throat, until he became aware of his son's presence, when they relaxed, and dropped heavily into his lap.

"Oh! Tom," he cried, "I am very glad you are here. I have had another of those awful dreams. Isn't it hard that I can't sleep in peace—isn't it cursed hard upon me?" he exclaimed.

"I should imagine that sleeping in this chair was bad for you," said Tom.

"You may imagine what you please," replied Sir John: "if I lie down my head slips out of

bed and hangs over the side—you heard me say so.”

“Yes.”

“Still this chair is terribly uncomfortable to-night.”

“Shall I ring for the nurse?”

“You may as well—you’re not much good yourself,” grumbled Sir John, “or, when you had seen me fighting and gasping, you would have woke me up at once.”

“Shall I give you some of the medicine that Ursula left here?”

“It’s no use,” he answered. “It’s no cure for these dreams of horror which get worse, and worse, and worse.”

“This did not last long, at any rate,” said Tom.

“How do you know how long it lasted?” inquired his father.

“You were sleeping calmly the moment before you called out.”

“Did I call out?”

“Yes.”

“What did I say?” he asked, curiously.

“Something about mercy, or recommending some one to mercy.”

“Yes, it’s all one infernal tune. I was on the jury, trying some one for murder—Ursula, I think,” he said. “I daresay we should have come round to the drop, as usual, if I had slept another five minutes.”

“You mentioned the name of Hildebrandt in

your sleep," said Tom. "Do you know any one of that name?"

Sir John jumped as if under the influence of a galvanic battery. Of self-command he had never possessed a great deal in his best days, and he was ill and shattered now. They were keen eyes, however, which glinted under the shaggy brows, when Sir John had recovered from his surprise.

"What name did you say?" he inquired.

"Hildebrandt."

"I don't know any one of that name," muttered Sir John.

"Possibly. But you mentioned it in your sleep, unless I am very much mistaken."

"You *are* very much mistaken," was the reply.

Tom did not persist in his inquiries; he had been surprised, but he did not desire to drag his father into argument, if argument were necessary. It was not likely that he had been mistaken again, unless he was suffering from Hildebrandt on the brain, instead of his sire, that night.

"Are you going to ring for the nurse?" asked Sir John, fretfully. "Am I to be kept out of bed, and robbed of my natural rest, all night?"

Tom touched the button of the electric bell at this protest, and presently the nurse entered the room. Sir John had forgotten the unfriendly terms upon which they had separated.

"I shall be glad to go to bed—I can't get on without you, Mrs. Coombes," he said. "Is my valet ready to assist you?"

"He is waiting without, Sir John."

"Can I——" began Tom, when his father interrupted him.

"No, no; you are tired and confused, and want rest as well as I do. You have been," he added, "extremely stupid the last hour or two; but possibly you may have a clearer head to-morrow. Good night."

"Good night."

Tom departed not unreluctantly. He was of no use as a nurse, and his father had grown tired of his company. It was one o'clock of the new day, and time was drifting on, and he had had no rest. The mystery about the house, and which might have been rustling up and down the stairs for what he knew to the contrary, would not rest either. Broadlands was surely a haunted place to which peace of mind could never come—a place of great surprises. That his father had called out Hildebrandt he was prepared to swear, and surely he must have known some one of that name at some period of his life. The name of his fellow-passenger, too—there was the remarkable coincidence!

Still a mere coincidence—let him repair to his room and end all speculations, for that time at least. Here would be peace—he had a slight suspicion that his journey was telling on him now, and that repose was necessary. For that time, at least, a truce to speculation—his head would be clearer in the morning, as his father

had hinted it might be. It had been bothered too much, or it was disposed to ache, like Marcus's.

He went quickly along the corridor, and entered his own room, where a new surprise awaited him.

No, his task was not finished yet, or the long day over for him. An old man, bright-eyed and vigilant, stood on the hearth-rug, with his back to the empty fire-grate; he bowed low as Tom came in.

"Fisher!" said Tom: "what the deuce do you want at this hour?"

"I couldn't rest without seeing you before you went to sleep, Master Tom," was the old butler's reply.

"Or let me rest either, eh?"

"No, sir—it didn't seem my duty to do that."

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT MR. FISHER CONSIDERED HIS DUTY.

"WELL, Robin," said Tom Dagnell—very coolly, now that he had recovered from his astonishment at finding the butler sitting up for him, "if you have any business to transact with me, the sooner we knock it off the better. You are quite sure the news will not keep?"

"I never said it was news," muttered Fisher.

Tom closed the door, and ensconced himself in a big chair that was planted on the hearth-rug.

"Take a seat, Robin—and begin."

Robin sat down facing him, but did not begin as requested. He stared at our hero in an odd and perplexed manner; he scratched his head, he unfastened his white neckerchief, and re-tied it in an enormous bow, he coughed once or twice behind his large-veined hand.

"Now, then, my slow old friend, what is your mission? You have a duty to perform, you know," said Tom, impatiently.

"Yes, Master Tom, I have a duty to perform,"

replied the old man, thus adjured, "and I can't slight it, even for an hour. You won't like me for it; you will say it ain't my place, and I forget myself: but I am an old man who can bear anything from you. I always could."

"This is a big preface, Fisher," said Tom. "Now, then, for the duty."

But Mr. Fisher had his own style of address, and was not to be hurried.

"I've known you and Mr. Marcus from babies. I have looked on both of you in your cradles, and so what I say won't come as from a stranger," said Mr. Fisher.

"Certainly not, but——"

"I thought this a happy day for all of us, when you came back to brighten the old home—but it mayn't be after all. I don't see it now as clearly as I did."

"I don't see anything but fog, Fisher," remarked Tom. "Why the deuce don't you blow the steam off, and let me get to bed?"

"I'm sorry to keep you up, Master Tom. I'm ashamed of troubling you at such an hour. I——"

"If you do not instantly let fly your information, warning, advice, or whatever it may be, Robin, I shall catch up your small but aggravating carcass and drop it on the lawn outside my window. You will not have far to fall, and I shall be rid of you till breakfast time," said Tom.

"You are always in such a hurry," complained the butler. "It's this drefful haste of yours that makes the mischief. I remember——"

Tom rose and opened the window of his room.

"Upon my honour, I mean it, old boy," said Tom. "It's an easy drop, and will not do you any harm."

"You'd never be so ridiculous," Mr. Fisher remarked, taking a firm clutch of the arms of his chair nevertheless. "You're not the foolish boy now to play such tricks on me."

"Good night, Robin," said our hero, advancing, "you're off, unless——"

"It's about Miss Ursula, then," blurted out Mr. Fisher.

Tom stopped at once.

"I'm sorry I can't listen," he said, very gravely now.

"You have a right to know what is going on in this house. Why, Master Tom, they actually want to marry you to your cousin."

"I am aware of it," said Tom, shutting the window and returning to his seat.

"What—already?"

"Yes, already."

"They've told you?"

"Yes, they have told me."

"Just like them," said the old man, shrugging his shoulders; "before you have had time to re-

member how you quarrelled with her, and how you hated her five years ago."

"I never hated her, Fisher."

"Nobody ever did like her, and nobody ever will," said the old man, decisively. "Nobody——"

"Hold hard, Robin," interrupted Tom: "I have said Miss Dagnell must not be a subject of discussion between us. She will be my wife, and you must learn to respect her for the young master's sake."

"You will never ask Miss Ursula to be your wife—if you give yourself a week to think on it. There, I only want you to take a week to think on it," he urged. "It ain't a long time, is it, for a man to make up his mind in?"

"You were a friend to me in the past days, Robin, and I will speak as to a friend. I proposed to my cousin this evening, and she accepted me," said Tom. "There, shut your poor old mouth, and give over glaring at me—and if you ever liked the wilful lad who has come home again, you will like the object of his choice, for his sake."

The old man put his elbows on his knees, and took his grey head between his hands.

"My God! so quick as this, and after all my care," he moaned; "poor boy, poor boy!"

"Come, come, this is foolish, Robin," said our hero, patting him on the back. "If you knew all, you would rejoice with me."

"Do *you* rejoice?" said the old man, looking up curiously.

"I do."

"I won't say another word against her—if I can help it," he added, with a quaint reserve. "But it ain't what I expected, or what you deserved. You're too good for her, Master Tom," he said; "and you've been and thrown yourself away."

"You speak too plainly."

"Yes, yes," said the old man, rising, "but you will put up with it, Master Tom, for this once. I'm upset, I can't serve you now; I can't tell you anything I wanted to; I can't say another word—you are going to marry her!"

"Ay, and Robin Fisher is going to wish me joy."

"If wishin' went for anythin' in this world, there should be a mighty difference before the morning," replied the old man, slowly, as he walked towards the door.

"Good night," Tom called to him.

"Good night to you, sir. You must not mind my troubling you in this way," he muttered.

"We will say no more about it, Robin."

"It will make things worse instead of better by telling Miss Ursula that I came to warn you of the plot between her and your father," Robin continued.

"Plot is a strange word for the situation, Robin,"

replied Tom. "But, there, I will not tell Miss Dagnell that you think I am too good for her."

He laughed as he spoke, but the lined face of the old man did not waver from its set expression. The engagement of Tom Dagnell was no laughing matter to him.

"Thankee. It is just as well," he said, as he turned the handle of the door. "I'm the oldest servant in the house; your father was a stripling, younger than yourself, when I first knew him, but length of service would not save me, if she spoke against me to Sir John."

"She speaks not against man or woman, Robin. She is the most unselfish being I have ever met. If you only knew!"

"I know too much, I think, sometimes," was the enigmatic reply.

He was passing through the open doorway, when a strange idea, almost a suspicion, crossed the mind of the young man whom he was quitting.

"One moment, Robin," exclaimed Tom: "do you remember how many years you have served my father?"

"Close upon four and thirty, I take it," was the answer.

"A long and honourable service—how have you borne it all this time, I wonder!" said Tom.

"I wonder, too, for he was never like another man in his sulks and passions, was he?" said

Robin. "He was always on the wrong side, and the worst side."

"We will say not a word against Sir John again, Fisher," said Tom, "but of your long service with him; just one question."

"A hundred if you like. Shall I come back for a few minutes?"

"I'll not trouble you to-night, thank you. All I wished to ask was, Did you ever hear the name of Hildebrandt in this house?"

"Hildebrandt? I should think I had," was the quick reply.

"Indeed!"

"Paul Hildebrandt, you mean—your father's chief clerk, foreign correspondent, and so on, at the old firm in the city. He used to spend his holidays here, and your father and he were more like brothers than master and clerk once."

"Strange!" muttered Tom.

"Yes, it was strange; everybody thought so."

"And Hildebrandt? No, no, confound it, I will not ask any more questions," exclaimed Tom, "or play the spy in this house. Good night, old boy; thank you for all good intentions and bad manners, and don't forget to like your future mistress, for the young master's sake, and don't make too much of a row going along the corridor."

"Trust me. I can creep about like a cat," was Mr. Fisher's last remark, as he closed the door upon his master's son, and went away.

This was the end of the first day to Tom Dagnell—though it had extended into the next, and kept him wakeful. What a deal there was to think about, if he cared to disturb himself by reflection; if he were not already too tired for thought, he might consider what odd things had happened and been suggested to him since he had left "The Witch" in Littlehampton Harbour!

But he would set aside thought till the morning. Sufficient for the day was the evil, or the good, thereof. Pass it by, and have done with it. He was engaged to be married to his cousin Ursula, of all women in the world! Ah! of all women the best—the very best,—a good woman in a tract, or righteous novel—a something standing apart from the sordidness and narrow-mindedness of life, to whom it was a duty to pay reverence, as to one of Heaven's angels. And as for that doddering old Fisher, with his doubts and maunderings—pass him by too, a blot upon the surface of existing things. Tom Dagnell was very happy—very sleepy—still very much like the man in a dream. And why his father should rave of one Hildebrandt, and then deny all knowledge of the name, was past the comprehension of men even more wakeful than himself. He dropped off to sleep in the midst of this jumble of half-meditation, and was troubled no more. He slept too heavily to frame thoughts into dreams—he left all dreams to the feverish father, in the room where the curtains were

hanging before the door, as before the temple of some mystery. Tom had nothing on his mind to trouble his rest, and though poor Tom's life had been a long series of mistakes, there was no rust eating out the heart of things, and no dark shadow of man's sin cast back along the path by which he had found his way home.

BOOK II.

LIKE FATE!

CHAPTER I.

ON THE SANDS.

LIFE went on smoothly and quietly at Broadlands after the first day of Tom Dagnell's arrival. A son's acquiescence had calmed a father's suspense, and there was oil on the troubled waters which had surged about Broadlands. All was peace, one would have been disposed to assert after a cursory glance at the inmates of this establishment, and, however false or fleeting the sensation might be, there was, in one heart at least, an approximation to that happiness which comes possibly but once in life—the assurance of loving and of being loved. With Ursula Dagnell, the colours were brightest; but then hers had been a neutral-tinted existence before this glorious sunrise. She had lived in the shade and had suffered, and now the light was too strong for her. She stole back at times to the gloaming of her inner self, happy in her new thoughts, and conscious of the power to emerge into day, and the day's bliss of sweet words and fond companionship when it pleased her to give the signal.

Tom Dagnell was back again for good; he

had asked her to become his wife; she had told him more than once for how long a time she had loved him—even worshipped him—and grieved, oh! how bitterly! at every cruel sign of his indifference. She had whispered of her past feigned anger with him, of her strong efforts to disguise affection by a cloak of contradiction and opposition; she had spoken of the old dark days without weakening his respect for her, and she had dwelt almost eloquently upon the new fair time, until she could believe at last that here was the lover at her feet. To that which had set them side by side, she did not care to allude—nay, she took great pains to shun it. That was all ended with the first day of his arrival, and she would have no more of it, she said, if he were merciful. The story had been told by her sick uncle, and she had nothing to add thereto—there was the whole truth, and so an end to it!

“Very well,” Tom had said, “but you are an extraordinary girl, Ursula.”

“Extraordinary only in one way, Tom,” she answered.

“What is that?”

“To wait five years for you—without a word or look to live on all that time—and with never a thought in your hard heart for me.”

“In my stupid head, you mean,” said Tom. “I never had a heart that was worth boasting of, either for its hardness or softness.”

“Ah, you have only just discovered it.”

“Exactly.”

Ursula sighed.

"Well, I must not be jealous of the days when you did not think of me," she said, "or care for me never so little, and when I was praying with all my soul for you."

"Steady, Ursula; you will make me as vain as a peacock presently."

"I shall not mind if I make you love me half as much as I do you. And oh, Tom, if I fail altogether!" she cried.

"In a woman's vocabulary there is no such word as 'fail,' remember."

"I hope not," she said, thoughtfully, "for I want love, not gratitude, or kindness, or respect. Only real love!"

"You have it."

She shook her head.

"What you think is love," she said; "but there is only a faint semblance of it at present in my poor, stolid boy here."

She dropped her head on his shoulder, and he lowered his face to hers. When she raised it again her cheeks were wet with many tears, and she ran away from him before he could ask her why she had been crying.

"Yes, an extraordinary girl," he said again. "Who would have dreamed of Ursula being so impressionable, judging by grim antecedents. I don't know why—but I wish she was not quite so fond of me, or would talk a little less about it, or would wait till I talked about it to begin with, or would do something which

she does not do, or not do something which she does do, or—confound it, I am getting as muddled as Marcus! I'll go for a long walk away from this."

He was partial to long walks—as he had been before he went away—across the low-lying sweep of sea sands whereon he could wander for miles at low water, and muse on the future that was in store for him, and the peaceful change that had come to him. Very peaceful—the home-storms all gone, now that the angry father was locked away from his family. But within his own heart at least,—Tom could own it to himself, if to no one else,—there was an inner sense of unrest, a lurking consciousness that this was not the end of it!

There was something more—Heaven knew what—to come. His querulous mother thought so, and so did he—the mother who was never happy, or cared to see other people at rest,—who was never satisfied, not even with the engagement of her younger son to her husband's niece.

The marriage of cousins was always a mistake, she had observed, and this was another error, of course. If her health had been strong enough, she would have urged a protest against it, but she was a mere cypher in the house, and no one studied her! And so, this was not the end of it, she considered; and her son Tom, who did not always endorse his mother's opinion, thought so too. Perhaps the end was to be a greater happiness than this, thought Tom, also, for Ursula

Dagnell loved him very much, and spoiled him by her evidence of affection.

Some five weeks after their solemn troth-plight, on a dark, dull evening in March, Tom Dagnell set out for his solitary walk. Ursula could not accompany him early in the day, and his brother Marcus, who had been lately disposed to be companionable, and take long constitutionals with Tom for his own liver's sake, by express order of the family physician, had been a week in Birmingham, paying court to the daughter of the house of Oliver.

Tom Dagnell was not sorry to be alone; he was in the mood for his own company, and for nothing else save his own company, unless a huge mastiff, with whom he had fraternised lately, from the stable-yard, may be taken into account, and this animal trotted on by his side, as heavy and thoughtful as himself. Tom was not long to be without a companion that morning, however—he had proposed an idea, but Fate had disposed of it. Down the slope that led to the sea, a thin, spare gentleman, with black beady eyes, and with a small black moustache and pointed beard, came hurrying after him, reached his side, took off his hat by way of salutation, and made him a low bow.

"Mr. Thomas Dagnell, I believe?" he said, with a strong foreign accent. "If I am wrong, I ask ten thousand pardons—if I am right, you will excuse the liberty that I have taken in addressing you."

Tom looked at the speaker, who was a stranger to him, he was sure, and said:

"Quite right, I am Thomas Dagnell."

"I rejoice that I have found you. They told me at Broadlands you had come this way to the sea. I did not waste a minute. I have been running very fast to overtake you. You will excuse my heat and excitement. I am a very anxious man—a man naturally excited and easily distressed—see how hot I am!" he went on, with exceeding volubility of manner, and much gesticulation.

"Yes, you look warm," said Tom, eyeing the stranger curiously, "but then you have had a sharp run after me from Broadlands. And now you have found me, what is your business?"

"You will give me time to collect my thoughts—my breath?"

"Oh! certainly. Take as much time as you please. It is not mine to give, but you're welcome for me."

"I am greatly obliged to you," was the answer, with another bow. "If you will allow me to state the nature of my business, as soon as I can collect my thoughts so as to be brief and clear, and not trouble you too long, it will be another favour conferred upon a stranger in a foreign land."

Tom Dagnell did not relish this effusiveness of manner, but he replied to it with a blunt "All right," and stepped on to the sands at a slow pace, out of regard to his "winded" companion.

The man at his side was evidently a foreigner, and foreigners, on the whole, had been kind and courteous to him in the days of his pilgrimage. He supposed there was a pitiable story to hear, and money to give away; he could afford to give money away now—but he wished the man would regain his breath, let loose his complaint, receive his *douceur*, and be gone. He didn't care for his society, neither did Cabbage, his dog, who was growling inwardly at the intrusion as at a liberty which he should be glad to resent, and on a spot which he had already marked out in his eye as eligible for seizure.

There was a silence of a few minutes, and then the stranger began, and to the purpose.

“My name is Hildebrandt,” he said.

CHAPTER II.

ON GUARD.

TOM DAGNELL was surprised, very much surprised, at this announcement.

"The devil it is!" escaped him before he knew what he was saying.

Mr. Hildebrandt's small black eyes were fixed with great intentness on our hero, as if to note the effect of his revelation.

"The name is not unfamiliar to you, I perceive. I am very glad of that; I was afraid you might have heard it for the first time this morning," said Mr. Hildebrandt.

Tom did not answer at once. He was on his guard now. He was not quite certain that it was wise to say too much. If this were the father of the lady with whom he had travelled from Honfleur to England, it might be politic to be courteous, for that mysterious young lady's sake. She had run away from home—she was never going to return to it, and this must be one of the folk who had helped to render home unbearable. What did he want on Littlehampton sands that day?

"The name is familiar to me. My father, in his city days, had a clerk of that name," Tom replied.

There was a pause on Mr. Hildebrandt's part now, and the black twinkling eyes for the first time came to a standstill, instead of rolling backwards and forwards under two beetle brows, after an unpleasant habit which they had.

"That is singular, for Hildebrandt is not a common name in England," replied the gentleman. "But I am not Hildebrandt the clerk, but Hildebrandt the father."

"Hildebrandt the father," replied Tom. "I don't understand, but proceed."

"I am the anxious, distraught, almost maniacal father, sir, of the lady who crossed from Honfleur to Littlehampton on the night of the fifteenth of March. You were a passenger by the same ship—you are an Englishman and a gentleman—I appeal to you to help me all you can in my efforts to recover her."

Mr. Hildebrandt flung his arms wide and executed a jump upon the sands in his excitement, and the dog immediately jumped also, and with his capacious jaws within an inch of his hand.

"Down, Cabbage," shouted Tom; "excuse the animal, Mr. Hildebrandt, but he thinks you are playing with him."

Mr. Hildebrandt became calmer and paler.

"I never play with dogs. And that is a dangerous beast," he muttered, "and ought to be shot."

"Do you hear that, Cabbage," said Tom, laughing, as he patted the dog's side, and Cabbage growled again as though he perfectly understood the allusion, and considered it inappropriate.

"I am a nervous man," said Mr. Hildebrandt, half apologetically, "and have a horror of dogs. I am unduly excited this morning, too—you see before you, sir, a man of many trials."

He might be, but Tom did not sympathise with his troubles yet. He distrusted him very much; in his hasty judgment—and he was always hasty, his friends said—Tom had already set the man down as the cause of Miss Hildebrandt's flight from home. Surely he was right; she had hinted at a home rendered unbearable by opposition, and she had spoken of a "good mother" with tears brimming in her eyes, as though the mother at least had been very dear to her. Assuredly this man was not to be trusted; the very look of him was enough for Tom Dagnell's quick judgment.

"I am sorry for your trials, Mr. Hildebrandt," he said at last, with forced politeness, for he was singularly prompted to be rude, "but I do not see how I can alleviate them in any way. I know nothing of your daughter."

"You have not seen her since you travelled together by 'The Witch'——upon your honour as a gentleman, you have not seen her?" cried Mr. Hildebrandt.

"I wish you would not keep reminding me of

my honour as a gentleman——you may take my simple word for it, I am telling you the truth."

"Your pardon, sir, if I have given any offence," and off went Mr. Hildebrandt's hat again, and up went Cabbage suddenly in the air after it.

Mr. Hildebrandt jerked himself on one side very quickly; his rolling eyes, which nothing seemed to escape, stood him in good stead here, or his hat would have been certainly appropriated.

"That is a horrible monster," he said, with a shudder. "Cannot you send it away for a few moments. I hate dogs—*Mon Dieu*, how I hate them!"

"I suppose we have come to the end of our conversation, and can say good morning," Tom remarked. "If I have not seen your daughter, it is impossible I can give you any particulars concerning her."

"You conversed a great deal together during the latter part of the voyage. Perhaps she——"

"Wait a moment," said Tom, laying a hand upon his arm. "How do you know we conversed together?"

"I have made inquiries everywhere, and of everyone, after her cruel desertion of us," was the answer. "She was tracked to 'The Witch,' and the crew have given me all the particulars they know. They noticed that a gentleman conversed with her a great deal, that he saw her to the train and exchanged some parting words. And it was not difficult to dis-

cover that it was Mr. Thomas Dagnell, of Broadlands, who had been her companion on that day."

"No, that was not difficult, I suppose," remarked Tom.

"It struck me that something she had said to you might offer a clue to her recovery—for find her we must, at any cost, if she is amongst the living. It is imperative."

His hands were rising in the air again, when he remembered Cabbage, who had a penchant for hands, and he put them in his pockets.

"I cannot help you, Mr. Hildebrandt. She did not give me her address," said Tom.

"She is an outspoken girl. I had a faint hope that she might have done so," he muttered.

"No."

"Mr. Dagnell, a few words more," said Mr. Hildebrandt, coming to a full stop. Tom and his dog stopped also.

"You appear strangely indifferent to a father's solicitude concerning the disappearance of his child," said Mr. Hildebrandt, impressively; "and I can only attribute it to one motive, a distrust of me. You answer evasively. You tell me nothing—neither what she said or how she looked, if she were calm or excited, happy or unhappy. You leave me altogether in the dark, as though I were a stranger to the afflicted girl of whom I am in search. A man more callous to human suffering I have seldom met. I say it without any fear of you, or your dog. You are hard and unjust to me!"

Tom Dagnell was taken aback at this outburst, which was very genuine, or else acting of the highest order of genius, it was doubtful which. But he was still upon his guard; for ever before him, keeping him reticent, and holding back his sympathy, was the handsome face of the dark lady he had said farewell to at the Railway Quay, Littlehampton. To trust the man was to distrust her, and though there was romance in it all, and baseless theory, he felt that he was acting as her friend that morning.

"I am sorry you should think badly of me, Mr. Hildebrandt," he said, "but I am powerless to help you, even if I were willing."

"Yes, yes, that's it: 'if you were willing,'—which you are not," he cried. "You have been set against me by that child of mine. She has told you I am a monster, a *scélérat*, and you have believed it all, and are on your guard against me."

"She never mentioned her father to me," Tom replied.

"Did she tell you of a mother on her sick-bed, a woman dying fast now with anxiety as to the fate of her child?"

"No."

"I thought as much. It is astonishing how she has behaved, and yet to me it is natural and sad."

He took his hands from his pockets, and laid them on Tom's arm. Cabbage immediately snapped at them, and he put them behind him.

"She is mad, sir," he continued, in a low, deep voice, "she is in no way accountable for her actions—she is the victim of illusions that are gaining strength with every day. If we could only find her—if the faintest clue were only given to us to find her."

Tom Dagnell was strangely callous; he was not in the least distressed by Mr. Hildebrandt's statement; he did not believe in it, only in that part of it which betrayed the gentleman's anxiety to learn where his daughter might be located at the present time. Miss Hildebrandt had not run away from home without a fair excuse, any more than he had done the same thing five years ago. From his own experience, he was inclined to believe in runaways—exceptional as his bitter past had been.

"I cannot help you, Mr. Hildebrandt," he said again.

"She was going to Birmingham, professed to be going there, at least," he continued, "but she never reached that place."

"How do you know?"

"Sir, you give me no information, and yet you wish, or seem to wish, to elicit information from me," said Mr. Hildebrandt, drawing himself up. "Is it remarkable after this that I should distrust the last man with whom she was seen in earnest conversation? If you were a gentleman, you would assist me in every way, and not try to thwart me."

"I don't see what a 'gentleman' has to do

with it," said Tom, coolly: "I cannot assist you, I am powerless. You know as much as I do—more than I do. I saw your daughter once in my life. I have neither seen nor heard from her since—I do not know where she is. But I will tell you one thing before I say good day, Mr. Hildebrandt."

Mr. Hildebrandt waited with rolling eyes for the last statement, even took one step back on the wet sand, as if the expression in the young man's face was ominous of mischief—which it was not.

"Well, sir," he said, interrogatively, "well?"

"I will say," he continued, "that, if I knew her address, I should keep it to myself until I had her permission to divulge it—that I could trust implicitly in everything she might tell me, and that I neither believe in her madness, nor in you. Good day."

"I came to you a father in distress—I did not think it was in human nature to insult me in this fashion," said the man, sorrowfully, or with affected sorrow, "but I wish you good day, Mr. Dagnell."

During the first few moments after he had left Mr. Hildebrandt, Tom regretted that he had allowed his opinion to escape him—after all, if he were in the wrong, what a rude brute he had been! But he was not distressed at his treatment of Mr. Hildebrandt, as he considered the matter further on his homeward journey—the man was to be distrusted, for the girl he had

met on "The Witch" was truth itself. And he would have played a trick upon him, too; he had shifted his ground to suit, as he thought, the character of him whom he addressed—a man to be extremely wary of, this Hildebrandt. If Tom only knew Miss Hildebrandt's address; if he could in any way possibly discover it, and put her on her guard against the presence of an enemy in England. An enemy—her own father! Heaven forgive him if Tom were wrong, but he thought an enemy, deadly and dangerous. He had mixed much in the world, and met with many men of various types; he was not unskilful in his estimate of human character, and he did not like the looks of Mr. Hildebrandt, although no man with small, black eyes continually on the move could look particularly nice. He would have been glad to know why the daughter was wanted back so urgently. He did not believe in the story of the dying mother; that was evidently an afterthought. Here was another mystery rising up before the eyes of one who had protested strongly against mystery, and though he had nothing to do with it, though it seemed to lie apart from his life, it perplexed him hugely. The one conscious fact by which he was beset seemed to be that there was a woman in danger. When and by what she was threatened was hidden from him by a cloud of uncertainty, but for some reason, and in some fashion, there was a danger threatening Miss Hildebrandt. That fact grew upon

him, and bore him down. If he had been superstitious, which he had never been, nor was likely to be, he would have believed in a solemn, silent warning to him as he went home across the sands, and of secret voices, in the murmuring of the waves, telling him to act, or try to act, in the service of one whose face had haunted him more than he would care to confess.

The telegraph, potent instrument for good and for evil, came to his mind as the first clear thought. Marcus was in Birmingham, a guest at the house of the Olivers. It was easy to ask one question by the wires. Yes, why not? He left the sands, and worked his way towards the Post Office in the town, where he telegraphed as follows to his brother:—

"From Thomas Dagnell, Broadlands, Sussex, to Marcus Dagnell, Elmslie House, Edgbaston, Birmingham.—Have you at any time met, or heard of, a Miss Hildebrandt, in Birmingham? Ask all friends you know, and send address if possible. No reply wanted unless information can be obtained."

"Rather mad this—and of me," said Tom, as he read the telegram over, before he paid his fee, and went back to Broadlands, in a thoughtful mood, wondering in particular whether his brother would think he was mad too, and grow excited in consequence.

No ready answer came—cross wires, or Marcus being in fault, perhaps, or no information being obtainable. Tom had not expected a reply, for

all his forethought; it was not natural, or to be expected. But three hours afterwards he sat and held his breath, almost with dismay, as the footman came in with an orange-coloured envelope on a salver, and walked across the drawing-room towards him.

It was early in the afternoon when the telegram arrived. Sir John Dagnell was asleep upstairs, and Lady Dagnell was asleep downstairs by the closed French windows. It was fine, fresh, warm May weather now, when open windows were things to be desiderated, but Lady Dagnell on that particular day was afraid of fresh air—a cold chill would certainly be her death, she thought, in her present state of health. Ursula was as wakeful and watchful as usual, and the entry of the servant immediately attracted her attention.

“A telegram, Tom,” she said, “for you!”

“It’s from Birmingham,” replied Tom, as he took the message from the salver.

Strange the effect upon one’s nerves—even the nerves of a strong self-reliant man—is that of the unexpected! Tom’s hand actually shook for an instant as it held the envelope, and Ursula said, anxiously:

“Something has happened, Tom! You expect bad news?”

“No, upon my word, I don’t,” Tom hastened to explain. “I will tell you all in an instant. This is in answer to a telegram of my own that I sent off this morning.”

"To Birmingham?"

"Yes."

"Dear me, how mysterious you are getting! You, too!" said Ursula.

"Yes—no—I'll tell you about it in a minute," he said, absently, as he opened the envelope, took out the pink paper and unfolded it.

Ursula was interested, deeply interested, in the operation, and watched him furtively over the fancy work upon which she had been engaged, and which was now dropped suddenly into her lap. The effect of the telegram on her lover was greater than she could have imagined, than he could have possibly been prepared for, having had time, too, to guard against surprise.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, as his grey eyes distented, and his hands began once more to tremble, "am I awake or dreaming? Is it all true?"

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN IN DANGER.

THERE was a moment's painful silence in the room, and the ticking of the clock upon the mantel-shelf, the heavy breathing of the sleeper in the chair, became singularly distinct.

"What is the matter?" said Ursula, rising and approaching him; "will you not tell me, dear? Is the news so very bad, that you will not trust me with it?"

"Give me time to think, Ursula," said Tom. "I don't know that it is fair, or that I have a right to let you see this telegram."

Ursula became very pale as she stepped away from his side.

"As you please. If you say there is a reason why I should not see it, I will have no further curiosity concerning it, if—I can help it," she responded.

"No, I will have no secrets from you, Ursula—that would be a bad beginning indeed. Here it is," he said, passing the telegram across to her: "what would you do?"

Ursula took the paper from his hands, and

exclaimed, in a husky tone of surprise, as she glanced at the address of the sender,

"From a lady!"

"Yes, that's the odd part of it."

"I—I don't think there is anything very odd in that," she replied, reading the telegram meanwhile, turning paler still as she perused it, and then looking towards Tom Dagnell, with a set, stern face, too, as if for further explanation.

"What does it all mean?" she inquired.

Ursula Dagnell might well have been as surprised as her cousin; it was a strange missive for a man to receive. Here is the text of the third telegram, which our history has had to chronicle:—

"From Miss Hildebrandt, 430, Bath-row, Birmingham, to Mr. Thomas Dagnell, Broadlands, near Littlehampton. — You thought you might be of help to me once. I am without a friend now, and in great danger. There is no time to be lost."

Ursula sat down, with the missive in her hand, and looked across at her lover. They were two very grave faces, but Ursula's was the graver of the two.

"What does it all mean?" she said, peevishly again. "Why don't you tell me?"

"There is a woman in danger, that's all I know at present," answered Tom.

"And what woman is *this*?" asked Ursula, striking her hand upon the telegram.

"One moment, and I will explain," and Tom Dagnell rushed from the room into the hall,

where the telegraph boy was waiting for the return message. Ursula Dagnell read the paper again, and then moaned softly to herself. A few words of Tom might readily explain it—she thought they would, she prayed they would,—but, had any one stabbed her with a knife, she could not have felt more surely and completely wounded by the few words which were scrawled upon the paper there. They had affected him so much; they had unnerved a man not easily taken by surprise; they seemed part of a story which had been scrupulously kept from her: a story with a woman in it, of whom she had never heard. She did not wait for his return; she rose and walked softly out of the room, closing the door behind her without disturbing the slumbers of Lady Dagnell; she stood by the side of Tom in the hall, as the messenger was being let out of the front door.

“Have you answered this already?” she said, with the telegram still in her hand.

“Yes, of course—of course,” was Tom’s hurried reply.

“What have you said?” she asked, sharply.

“That I am coming—that if she be in any immediate danger, she is to go to the Olivers, and see my brother Marcus.”

“You—you are going to her?” said Ursula. “I—I don’t understand yet; come into the garden, where there is fresh air, and tell me what it means. I shall be stifled else. Tell me the whole truth, Tom, without disguise.”

"I haven't anything to disguise, Ursula," said Tom, as they walked from the house into the garden. "What made you think I had? Surely, you cannot entertain a jealous feeling in this matter. It is all as cloud-land to me as to you."

"Why did you telegraph to her this morning, to elicit so remarkable an answer?" asked Ursula.

"I did not telegraph to her."

"You said it was an answer to your telegram, only a few minutes ago," said Ursula; "why do you prevaricate like this, unless it is with the intention of deceiving me?"

Poor Ursula was very indignant, and Tom linked her arm in his own and led her across the soft green grass, away from the house and the people who might be looking from the windows at them.

"I said, before I had opened the envelope, that I had expected a telegram, but not from this lady."

Ursula's face cleared for an instant, and then shadowed slowly again as the conversation proceeded.

"Oh, I am glad of that," she said, quickly; "but—you telegraphed?"

"Yes, to Marcus."

"And about this very woman!" she cried.

"Oh! I am sure of it—I can read everything in your face, plainly enough. You cannot hide the truth from me!"

"It was certainly about this *lady*—and I have

no wish to hide the truth from you, Ursula," said Tom Dagnell, with a dignity of demeanour he did not often assume; "on the contrary, I wish to tell you all—I was going to tell you, only you interrupted me."

"Very well. You will find me a patient listener, and I will not interrupt you again," replied his cousin.

Tom and Ursula wandered through the great garden grounds of Broadlands whilst the former told his story briefly and clearly, of his meeting with Miss Hildebrandt's father that morning, of his suspicions of him, of his telegram to Marcus in consequence, of the strange telegram that came back as if in answer, and was no response to the inquiry he had made, or from the man to whom he had made it.

"You wished to warn her of the father's appearance in England, I presume," said Ursula, calmly, when he had finished the story, upon which she had not intruded with a single word, and to which she had listened with an inflexible countenance.

"That was my intention, certainly," replied Tom.

"Ah, well, it was very kind to interest yourself so much in a girl whom you had seen once on board a steamboat; she should be infinitely obliged for the pains which you have taken in her service," said Ursula.

"Still jealous!"

"I am a jealous woman, Tom; I owned it to

you on the day you came home," she answered; "but I am only surprised now."

"I should have thought you were jealous, Ursula, if you had not assured me to the contrary," said Tom; "but the whole affair is too absurd."

"It is like a romance, and romances *are* absurd enough, as a rule. Mine is, I am afraid," she muttered, "and yet it is the only one I have ever had."

There were tears behind the glasses, which seemed to grow dim suddenly.

"Ursula!" cried Tom, solicitously.

"Oh! let me be," she said, still peevishly; "let us talk of this young woman. 'This lady,' I ought to say, after your corrective emphasis of a few moments since."

"She is a lady—you will not misname her," replied her lover.

"You don't know any more of her than I?"

"No—but I know this," said Tom—"she is a woman in danger."

"I don't believe a word of it," cried Ursula, warmly.

"I believe every word," said Tom.

"Because you are anxious to believe it, and to act upon it, and get away and see her! There, why don't you own it, with your old straightforwardness? Are you afraid," she asked, with quivering lips, "that I shall not be strong enough to bear it? Oh! don't fear!"

"My dear old girl, don't be foolish, or take

this to heart so seriously," he cried, passing his arm round her, and drawing her to him against her will. "I would be of service to a woman in distress, and you should not blame me for the wish. What is there to be offended at in that?"

"She is an adventuress—I could swear to it already."

"Ah! you haven't seen her."

"I hope to Heaven I never may," Ursula retorted, passionately.

"How hard one woman can be upon another! If we men hated each other as quickly and irrationally, what a frothy and mad world it would be altogether," said Tom; "but then, you're not jealous, cousin, are you?"

He laughed, but it was not a particularly natural effort. He was in no laughing mood; he was perplexed about Miss Hildebrandt, and anxious and eager to be of service, and, above all, he was assured in his own heart of the magnitude of the danger besetting her, and at which his irate cousin scoffed—but he was sorry for Ursula's feelings, and would have soothed them had it been in his power, which it was not.

This was the Ursula of five years ago—cross, contradictory, unjust, hard to impress, difficult, almost impossible, to lead from her own convictions to others, a stubborn, unyielding, firm being—a very Dagnell. Was this the woman to whom he had plighted his faith and offered his love?—the woman who had become, by the very

spirit of self-sacrifice, a heroine above all heroines, who was meek and gentle, and who had owned that there was no happiness in life for her without a thought of him in it? Surely this was not the new creation that he had hoped would be, for ever afterwards, his one support and comfort.

"Why don't you leave me?" she said, irritably. "You will be too late, if you waste time here any longer."

"You see I must go—that it would be unmanly of me to take no notice of this."

"A more cautious man would make a few inquiries—ask Marcus to——"

"Marcus!" interrupted Tom. "Would you rely on the energy of Marcus Dagnell for anything?"

"I am not going to argue with you on this point, Tom," said Ursula, "or on any point. You have explained all to me, and, frankly, I am not satisfied with your explanation."

"I am very sorry; what more do you require?"

"Nothing."

"I have told you everything."

"It may be so; God knows—I don't. If you have no more to say," she added, "let us get back to the house."

"Very well; but I wish you had heard all in a better spirit, and with more faith in the one who told the story," said Tom.

"I pity him a little, for he is deceiving himself as well as me."

"On my honour—no."

"This is the one face that has interested you deeply—the face of her who crossed from Honfleur to Littlehampton."

"I was interested in her story. I did not say that her face had impressed me so much as her misfortunes. You are not fair with me, Ursula," he replied.

"Are you fair with me—if you wish to go away on this Quixotic errand—if you are determined to go?" she cried.

"Ursula," said Tom, very gravely now, "there was a weak girl alone in the world, beginning a new life, and I assured her if she were in need of a friend, or the advice of a friend, she would find me at this house. She has telegraphed that she is in danger," he said, with a force and sternness at which she shrank: "am I to be coward enough to send word back that her danger is none of my business, and I shall keep away?"

Ursula wrung her hands together, and looked with intentness at him.

"You are offended with me!" she said, almost submissively.

"No, no; but you have not given me credit for a fair and honest purpose. I have a design in this. I am the dupe of an adventuress; I am everything but what you, of all women, should think me," he replied.

"Can you tell me you do not love this girl?"

"What nonsense! I have seen her only once in my life."

"And you do not love her?" she persisted.

"I do not love her."

"The poets and novelists tell us of love at first sight, very frequently," said Ursula; "such things may be, I suppose. But I believe you now, Tom, and I will not say another word against your going."

"There, that's the true little woman emerging from the clouds in which she delights to enwrap herself," said Tom, kissing her very heartily; "and I love her best when she is at her best."

"If you love me at all, that is," she sighed forth.

"What, again!"

"Tom," she said, putting her hands in his, and looking up into his face, "if you feel that all this has been a mistake, that we are not likely to be happy, that I shall shadow your whole life rather than add to your rejoicing, that you acted rashly on the night when you came home—say so now! I am strong enough to bear it, and to let you go away in peace,—ay, and with a poor weak woman's blessing, too. But say so now! Don't go on still thinking that you love me, still deceiving me, still misleading yourself and dragging me on the wrong path along with you. I am strong to bear it this day. I have always said your father's wishes were a grave mistake,—say so now, with me! If you can't love me, Tom, own

it like a man; don't kill me presently, like a coward!"

She leaned her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed there very passionately, with her arms tightening about his neck. Tom was moved, aroused, even depressed by the strong love of this strange woman for him; he felt the tears rising to his own eyes at her prostration and appeal. Had he been aware that he did not love her—that gratitude could never be love, or form a part of it—here was his opportunity to speak out, to set her from him, to act for the best and for both their sakes. In the troubled look upon his face was there the consciousness, for the first time, that he did not love this cousin with a love like hers, or even with a semblance of it, or was his breast stirred to its depths by this rare proof of her affection for him?

There was a pause, then he said:

"Courage, Ursula, I do not say so. Trust me as I trust you."

"For ever, Tom?"

"For ever."

So the storm passed over, and the sun broke through. But for ever is a long day, my children, and "never" and "for ever" have been the cuckoo cries of all lovers, for all time!

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE THE JOURNEY.

IT was settled, then, that Tom Dagnell should start at once for Birmingham, with the full permission of his lady-love. Can a man rush away in too much haste to the rescue of a woman in distress, much less a hero, even such a hero as we are attempting to describe? There was a rapid consultation in the big library, as to times of trains on the South-Coast and North-Western; there were speculations as to reaching there that night; there were perfect harmony and accord now between this odd pair of lovers sitting hand in hand "spooning" over a Bradshaw's time-table.

"I am happy now, Tom," murmured Ursula. "I feel I can trust you, even with a pretty woman!"

"Always a dangerous commodity, too, I have heard," he answered, laughing.

"When the man is weak and foolish—not a stern, strong-minded fellow like this," she said, as her head dropped upon his shoulder, fondly.

"This is better than 'saucing' each other, Ursie," he said, resting his hand upon hers. "What was the use of hard words, after all?"

"Oh, not any use, but 'the quarrels of lovers,' &c.—you know the adage, Tom?" she said.

"Yes."

"You will write me full particulars of your adventure?"

"Certainly."

"There need be no secrets between us," she reminded him. "Another woman in your confidence, and 'poor me' in the cold."

"Is it probable?"

"And you will not be long away? Birmingham, Tom," she remarked, gently, "is not quite at the other end of the world."

"I shall be whisked there in some three hours odd from Euston," said Tom.

"And be whisked back very shortly in the same fashion, I hope," replied Ursula. "The young lady will not remain always in danger—it is not a statuesque position."

"Ursula, Ursula," said Tom, admonishingly.

"Oh, this is good temper now—not bad."

"Yes, but what distress you may be jesting at, perhaps," he said.

"Perhaps!" she repeated: "there are all kinds of distress, and the lady is careful not to say what hers is. There is even a distress for rent, you know, and——"

Tom put his hand over the mouth of his lady-love.

"That will do, Miss Stinging-nettle," he cried, "the subject is ended for this evening. I will come back and laugh with you if I have been

tricked into this journey; and you shall sympathise with her and me if there is a real trouble to encounter."

"*With her and you?*" cried Ursula, and the eyes shot an angry fire through the glasses: "why do you speak as if her sorrow were yours——but there's an end of it. Shall you see Sir John before you depart?"

"Certainly."

"There will be no occasion to vex him by mentioning the exact nature of your errand."

"I will tell him I am going to Birmingham to see Marcus. That's quite correct as far as it goes, although a trifle evasive," said Tom.

"Yes, that will do. Should he become worse whilst you are away, there is that handy telegraph again," she said, a little satirically still.

Tom did not regard the satire, neither was he aware of it in this instance.

"Is he likely to be worse?" asked Tom, eagerly. "Have you heard anything fresh? I see no change in him, unless it is for the better."

"His is a lingering malady that time can never cure, the doctors say,—and it is as well for him that it is so," added the cousin.

"Don't think it, girl—don't say it," cried Tom.

"With his old strength would come the old evil passions, the bad thoughts and unworthy suspicions of us all," she continued, thoughtfully; "there is no change in him for the better, and so," looking very stern and hard, "I pray for his repentance, not for his recovery."

"I wish you had not said that," answered Tom. "It comes not well from you."

"Forgive me if I pain you again, and on such a subject, but it is the truth, and I cannot disguise it," she confessed.

It was a plain truth, too, thought Tom, as he went upstairs to bid his father adieu—very possibly it was a natural, and not uncommon wish in the household, and expressed even with more candour than Miss Dagnell's, over mugs of beer at the alehouse in the village lying between Broadlands and Littlehampton. Sir John had been feared, but never loved. There were strange legends of his gross injustice in the country. He had been a terror at home and abroad, and no one wished to see this old City upstart back again in his place. He was dying by inches, and there was an ugly murmur in the background, a low chorus of things animate, that said, "Serve him right! there will be peace when he is gone! Why cumpers he this fair earth so long?"

When Tom had told his father of his Birmingham journey, he thought that the old gentleman was really better, he was so much more like his old self at once. He sat with his skull-cap pulled over his brows, and found fault with everything. He swore more profanely than usual, he told his son that he might go to Birmingham—he might go to the devil—if he liked, and he might stop away as long as he liked, for nobody cared. It was all a matter of perfect

indifference to him, only, if he could take his sour-tempered, disagreeable mother along with him, he should be obliged. He had had enough of her tempers.

"Certainly, a little better in health," said Tom, when he was in the corridor. "Are the old days really coming back, I wonder? Am I afraid of them if they do: have I Ursula's wish at the bottom of my heart?" He stopped to reflect, then he said heartily, "No," and went downstairs, shook hands with his mother, told her the news, and bade Robin see that his port-manteau was in the hall.

"What a house to leave me in!" wailed forth Lady Dagnell. "What a family vault it will be when you have gone!"

She had never professed any pleasure in Tom's society from the day of his return, but the influence of his presence, the spell of his invariable good temper, had altered her more than she had bargained for, and she felt suddenly that she should miss him, and that home would be a different place without him. She felt, indeed, a little more like a mother than she had done before, and that is saying a great deal for Lady Dagnell. So matters may be considered fairly posed at Broadlands; and if Lady Dagnell improved in amiability ever so little, it was a counterpoise to Sir John altering slightly for the worse.

"Don't be long, Thomas," she even condescended to say, "and remind Miss Oliver that she

is to spend a few days at Broadlands when it pleases Heaven to take Sir John."

"Great God! how they all talk of his death," exclaimed Tom.

Yes, Sir John Dagnell's death was a "settled thing" at Broadlands. Only Tom—he who had been treated worst of all of them by the old tyrant—seemed to resent it as a *fait accompli*.

With Ursula he parted at last. She was tame and meek enough in the last moments of adieu—a very woman, broken down at parting with her sweetheart.

"God bless you! don't forget me!" were her words; then she walked away from the hall to hide her emotion from Robin Fisher and the servants who were lingering there. The carriage waited without now to take him to the station, and he stepped in like one accustomed to the splendour of it. Cabbage, a dog of a most discerning character, and with no more love in his heart for Broadlands than the rest of the staff of the establishment, suddenly plunged forwards, took his seat on the carriage mat, put his tongue out at the servants, and seemed actually to laugh at them.

"Come out, you imperent brute," said old Fisher, keeping, however, at a respectful distance, "come out, Cab."

"All right. Let him be," said Tom; "tell them I have taken him to Birmingham. A little change will do him good."

The carriage rattled away, and a white handkerchief was waved to him from a window at the side of the house. Then he was gone, and Ursula Dagnell's sorrow was greater than he ever knew.

"He will not come back as he has left me," she wailed forth, "he will never be the same again!"

CHAPTER V.

TOM TO THE RESCUE.

TOM DAGNELL was fortunate in the first portion of his journey, and was not troubled by delay on the road. The London, Brighton, and South Coast Company's train took him to town in good style, albeit the time dragged slowly in comparison with his impatience, and he was only amazed and grateful when he caught sight of the illuminated clock at the terminus. A heavy-looking gentleman in a big grey beard had been his companion in the first-class smoking compartment to town, but had blessed him with continual silence, and left him to the full enjoyment of the thoughts which were besetting him—thoughts of Ursula, her grief and jealousy, her suspicions, and that deep love for him which almost daunted him, shining luridly, as it were, into the darkness of his life like the red lights which glimmered along the railway line. Did it indicate the same thing—danger—far away at times, and menacing and warning others rather than himself? What an atrocious suggestion to cross a lover's mind! He crushed it out, and thought of Miss Hildebrandt's danger instead,

which he was hurrying to crush out also, as her champion, defender, and good friend.

Having disinterred poor Cabbage from his durance vile, and seen that he was not too confused or excited by his entry into London life, Tom secured his portmanteau, called a Hansom, and was borne towards Euston Square Station, where he saved the 9.15 train by ten minutes, and where Cabbage suddenly evinced so strong a desire to accompany his master into the same compartment, and so bitter a determination not to be conveyed again to a cupboard without protest, that half the staff of porters at the station were called in to resist Cabbage's defiance of the bye-laws, and a policeman on duty only saved his legs by springing suddenly on a form.

"Strange. The dog is docile enough, as a rule," said Tom, after Cabbage had been secured, and the heads out of all the carriage windows had been drawn in again.

"Shouldn't have thought it, sir," said the agile policeman before referred to, who had come down from his perch, and was standing now by the side of Tom's carriage, "and I shouldn't have been best pleased either, if he had had them teeth in me."

"He never bit any one in his life, but he is a dog of strong prejudices, and you are the first London policeman he has been introduced to," said Tom, as he slipped half a crown into the official's hand, as a monetary compensation for his alarm.

"Thankee, sir. It's a very good dog when you thoroughly know him, I daresay—but I should not care to know too much of him myself," said the policeman; "he made a grab at that old gent's legs before he turned upon mine—that was the beginning of the huproar, and I hope it isn't foby coming on, that's all."

Tom looked after the 'old gent' to whom the policeman had directed his attention, drew a quick, short breath, and said, "Singular."

The man with the grey beard who had travelled first class with him from Littlehampton to town, was stepping into a third-class compartment which looked very crowded and uncomfortable—certainly the same man, who had been now seized with a fit of economy as regarded his railway expenses, Tom considered, or was glad of any re-action in the shape of society after Tom's long silence. Not that the stranger had cared himself for anything but sleep and tobacco, or had addressed a word to him in the journey from the South. Had Tom known that the gentleman was going North also, he might have "chummed in" for the sake of companionship, even to put it selfishly, for the sake of a few inquiries, if the traveller knew Birmingham well, and was proceeding to that town, as was most likely—this being a Birmingham train which stopped at only a few places *en route*.

It was a curious coincidence, thought Tom, and whilst he was still thinking of it the doors were banged, crashed, and slapped to, the whistle

was given, and the train was on its way. Here was the beginning of the new journey—the real journey—: Tom had started to the rescue at last! He forgot all about Cabbage's unseemly behaviour and the disturbance at the station until the train stopped at Willesden Junction—a place he might have reached more easily from Victoria had not dogs and dog-tickets been on his mind, and a horror of many changes been healthily impressed there. He lowered the window and looked out. He listened for Cabbage's deep bark, but all was silent; he was drawing up the window again, as the night had grown chilly, and there was a half mist, half fog in the air, when the man with the grey beard walked by leisurely, and glanced askance at him.

Greybeard again, and for the third time! Should he ask him if the dog had startled him at Euston, and apologise for Cabbage's rudeness on the plea of his being a bad traveller; should he?—and then our hero's train of thought vanished into thin air, and there came an ugly suspicion into his head, and remained there. He was watched!

Tom was hasty in his surmise, but it gathered strength. This man with the beard had been employed to watch him, or had taken it into his head to watch him on his own account—why, or for what reason was this? Had Ursula thought——no, no, God forgive him such ungenerous distrust as that he should believe, even for an instant, that her doubts and jealousies had set a spy upon his movements. If he were

watched, this old man was in the Hildebrandt service, a spy upon her to whose rescue he was advancing, not from her whom he had left behind at Broadlands. But Cabbage could not have known that—no Darwinian theory could account for that. He would think the matter over before the train stopped again, and make sure whether his suspicions were unfounded or correct.

The train rushed on through the night at express speed—it was like approaching Violet Hildebrandt now—Birmingham must be close at hand, he was disposed to think, until a glance at his Bradshaw told him that it would be past midnight before he was in the great town, and that he had not as yet reached Blisworth Junction. It was a long way past ten of the night when Blisworth was reached, and Tom, with his faculties sharpened by suspicion, stepped on to the platform, portmanteau in hand—an ingenious *ruse* suggestive of his having reached the termination of his journey. He had hardly done so when the grey-bearded man peered from a window a long way distant from him, and, seeing Tom and his portmanteau, struggled at once with the door of the carriage, out of which he stumbled in unseemly haste.

“Yes, watched,” muttered Tom, “to a certainty!”

He stepped back again into the carriage as the man advanced in his direction, put his portmanteau under the seat, and looked out of the window,

calmly and complacently. Greybeard came to a full stop at this change of tactics on the part of our hero, seemed puzzled, and then turned back towards his own compartment. Tom, agile as a monkey, was on the platform again when the spy's back was turned, and running at a sharp pace towards him. He wanted a good look at Greybeard, so that he should know the man on a future occasion, that was all! And he had it, for Greybeard veering round, as if interested in a passing lady, gave a sudden jump at finding Tom Dagnell close to his elbow.

A German oath, of extreme significance, escaped him in his surprise, and Tom said, politely:

"I beg your pardon, but did my dog frighten you at Euston?"

"Was that yours?" said the man; "oh! no, not a ha'porth. I am very fond of dogs, sir."

The man spoke as from an inferior to a superior, from third class to first class—though that may denote a superiority the other way, not unfrequently—and in blunt, straightforward English without a tinge of foreign accent in it. But it was too late: the oath was of the purest German; and though the man had changed from middle-aged to old since morning, there were two unmistakeable black eyes rolling about in his head, when Tom was face to face with him.

"All right," said Tom easily. "I was afraid he might have snapped at you."

He went back to his carriage, the guard of

the train bawling out, "Now then, sir," and flung himself back amongst the cushions, out of breath with astonishment as well as haste. "Hildebrandt!" he exclaimed.

When the train was tearing its way through the night, Tom folded his arms and endeavoured to think out his plans. Here were Hildebrandt and he trying to outwit each other; the man had resolved to watch him, and had thought him a big liar long ago for saying that he knew not where to find his daughter. This was the upshot, and how to elude the spy was the one thought foremost in Tom Dagnell's mind.

Were they the good and evil genius of Violet Hildebrandt's life travelling by express to Birmingham? It seemed so, and Tom Dagnell was the good genius, of course! Surely these opposing forces would clash in the night shadows when Birmingham was reached.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PURSUIT.

IT was a quarter of an hour after midnight when the express train clanked into the New-street Station at Birmingham, puffing and creaking as though tired with its run from town. The travellers emerged from their separate compartments, and went their various ways; the cabs and carriages received their occupants and rattled off with dispatch; there was but little loitering that night in the great grimy North-Western Railway Station. Tom Dagnell was one of the loiterers, however, and a man with a grey beard was another. Both had business of importance to attend to; Tom to receive his portmanteau and find his dog; Greybeard probably to keep an eye on both Tom and dog—especially the dog. The crisis had arrived; what was to be done? Tom thought that he had sketched in his mind a sure plan for out-manceuvring the vigilance of the spy, but he was baffled at the first start, the spy having plans of his own. The dog released from his prison had, after one glance at Mr. Hildebrandt, danced round his master until reduced to less extravagance of demeanour by

a sharp word or two. A porter had carried the portmanteau to one of the roomy, cavernous Birmingham Hansoms, and had stowed it away in the interior of the vehicle, and the gentleman with the grey beard had also engaged a cab, and was talking to the driver confidentially, evidently giving him numerous directions.

Tom was prepared for this to an extent, but not for what followed before he quitted the station. There were a few hangers-on about the platform and in the carriage way—railway guards and porters, a policeman, some vacant folk who had come to meet friends who had missed the train, and were not present to be greeted; some far from vacant folk from the thieves' quarters, who had a hope that something might be filched away and nobody the wiser; a sharp-eyed woman or two in flaunting dresses, and with God knows what hopes or despairs in their poor minds, and a ragged boy shouting *Evening Mail* with all that perseverance and contempt for time for which newsboys in Birmingham are pre-eminently distinguished. One tall man, seedily attired, who had missed a friend or a chance of felony—it was doubtful which—startled Tom as he walked towards his cab, by suddenly approaching Mr. Hildebrandt and entering into conversation with him. Spy No. 2, prepared to watch also, thought Tom, and a new element of mischief upon which he had not calculated. Lastly, Spy No. 3, a long-limbed, lanky, unkempt boy with bare feet, to whom No. 2

made certain signs, as if to be ready and away. Mr. Hildebrandt was armed at all points, and prepared for various methods of procedure—a skilful general, and a man of many doubtful friends. Tom hesitated now as to his best course; the plan that he had formed for proceeding at once to Miss Hildebrandt's house was hardly practicable, and scarcely safe. It might be impossible to elude the vigilance of three spies—he must change his tactics as best he might, and leave the poor girl in suspense a little longer. Once the thought suggested itself to inform the policeman on duty that the man who had engaged the other cab was in disguise, and wore a false grey beard, but he was not certain of the utility of a fuss at the station. Mr. Hildebrandt might be questioned, but so would he be, and there would be addresses asked for, and much time wasted, and the secret of his own mission indirectly betrayed. Hildebrandt would make a counter-charge possibly, and say that his disguise was assumed to track a man in collusion with a mad daughter—no, that would not do. He must do his best in another way.

He stepped into a cab.

"Where to, sir?" asked the cabman.

The boy with the bare feet ran to close the door officiously, but was scared back by Cabbage, who, at a sign from his master, bustled into the vehicle, and barked loudly at the world in general.

"I wish I hadn't brought the beast," muttered

Tom, forgetting Cabbage had already been of service to him: "we shall be more easy to trace, now." Then he called out "Acock's Green," and the cabman immediately swore to himself profanely, as it was a bad fare, three or four miles out of Birmingham, and with no chance of a return customer at that hour of the night.

The cabman whipped his horse and started off, and Mr. Hildebrandt in the second cab followed in the rear. The spies number two and three melted away about their business—whatever that might be—the station yard was left behind, and the streets of Birmingham, dense with smoke that dull damp night, lay before the traveller. There were plenty of late folk in the streets too—Birmingham being busy at that particular period. The factory shafts were smoking and blazing with their eternal fires, and men and boys were going to work, as well as returning from those manufactories that were busy night and day.

"Drive fast, it will be worth your while," said Tom, through the trap: "I have a sum of money to throw away."

"All right, sir," said the man, brightening up.

"Can you hear what I say clearly?" Tom asked of the cabman.

"Oh, yes."

"Then listen to this—I am being followed by a second cab, and I wish to elude it at any cost."

"I see. That's it," said the cabman, familiarly. "Dashed if I didn't think something was up!"

The driver entered into the spirit of the thing at once, and whipped his horse into active service. He was of a calculating turn of mind, and felt that now was his opportunity to drive a bargain for himself. The trap opened again as they rattled through the streets.

"You'll stand a quid for this if I beat t'other one?" he asked.

"Two quid," replied Tom, his thoughts teeming with bribery and corruption.

"And whereabouts at Acock's Green do you want me to put you down?"

"I want just the contrary direction to Acock's Green."

"What the devil then——"

"There were spies at the station—don't you see?"

"Oh!"

"But drive where you like, and as fast as you can, for the present."

"All right," said the cabman, adding, as he closed the trap, "blest if this isn't a rum go, and no mistake."

He continued his course in the direction of Acock's Green, despite the hint which his fare had given him as to a change of programme presently. It was his turn to consider whether it was politic to proceed further in this adventure, or whether the receipt of two "quid" was a sufficient compensation for being an accessory after the fact. He was not quite certain that it was a safe piece of business upon which he was

engaged; but he had not committed himself yet, and his fare was hardly making off with stolen goods in company with a big mastiff. Besides, the whole thing was easily tracked and traced. The second cabman knew him as well as he knew the second cabman, and it was a mere question of a few inquiries if things came to the worst. He thought he could make sure of the sovereigns, without implicating himself in any felonious transaction.

Twenty minutes' hard driving, and then Tom looked round after his pursuers. The position was not in any degree satisfactory; the second cab was about twenty yards in the rear—not more, and keeping up easily with him.

"We shan't get rid of 'em, sir," said the cabman through the trap, "their horse beats us."

"It looks difficult," was Tom's reply.

"They ain't perlice, I suppose?"

"Oh, no; there will be no attempt to stop us."

"It will make a difference if that thundering big dog comes out, sir," suggested the driver.

"Then come out, Cab," said Tom.

When the dog had sprung out and was running by the side of the cab, the driver thought he would make another spin for it, he said, and if our hero did not mind, or thought it was advisable, he would work round towards Birmingham again.

They were beyond the manufactories now, and there were green hedgerows or trim suburban villas on each side of them; only in the

background rose the forest of factory shafts, with a lurid canopy of fire and smoke above it all.

"Keep to the outskirts of the town when you return," was Tom's last piece of advice, as they bumped and rattled along at a furious pace, cabman No. 1 having "spurred" considerably.

The cabman was losing his temper as the fact of his non-success began to impress itself upon his mind. No. 2 cab horse was decidedly the better animal—indeed a friend of Mr. Hildebrandt's had made sure of this by careful inspection, and had engaged the animal and its owner before the arrival of the train.

"It ain't a blessed bit o' use," Tom's driver roared through the trap now; "the horse behind is too fast for us—and mine's been out all day, and nearly dead beat."

"No matter, take it quietly, it's of no particular consequence. Have a cigar?" and Tom handed up his cigar-case to the driver.

"That's cool," muttered the cabman to himself, but he took the cigar, and Tom lighted up also, and once more reflected on the position. The cabman was reflecting too. He did not see the way to the "two quid" very clearly now; he grew anxious altogether about the honorarium, and after a while the trap opened again.

"I suppose you won't stop the money, as I've done my best, and nearly killed the 'orse?" he inquired, in a voice husky with suspense.

"You shall have the money if you follow my instructions," said Tom.

"Thankee, sir."

"Where are we?"

"We're humbugging about," was the answer, "but getting a bit nearer the town."

"Work round towards Cannon Hill Park if you can."

"That's a good work round."

"All the better."

Tom was pretty well assured that two out of the three spies were *hors de combat*, and that there was only Mr. Hildebrandt to reckon with. His plans were matured, and after a time he took the cabman into his confidence.

"How far are they from us now, cabby?"

"They've fetched up a bit."

"When we are near Cannon Hill Park, let me know."

"Yes, sir."

It seemed an age in approaching the park, but Tom's heart was rejoiced at last by the cabman saying, "We're pretty near now, sir."

"All right; now attend to my instructions. What's your number, and what's the number of the cab?"

The cabman afforded him the requisite information.

"I am going to trust you with my portman-teau," said Tom, in explanation. "You will drive presently to the 'Hen and Chickens,' and

say the gentleman is coming on to whom the luggage belongs."

"Werry good."

"Where's the dog?"

"Just beside us, sir."

"And where's the park?"

"Close at hand. We're passing the Rea, now."

"There are your two sovereigns; drive as fast as you can to the park palings, and pull up suddenly. Now then."

The money was passed through the trap, and Tom prepared for his final *coup*. It was his one chance of eluding his pursuer, and he should be able to start afresh afterwards, and without spies on his track. He was about to commit a trespass, but that might be satisfactorily explained afterwards if the police or the park authorities made any inquiries, or heard presently of his visit. At all events, matters could not be worse, and cab-horses and cabs could not scale park fences as well as he could.

The final spurt was put on as suggested, and when the park was reached the cab stopped and Tom sprang out. He was a young man, as agile as a fawn, and had always been something of an athlete. It was the easy work of a minute with him to climb the palings, and swing himself over them into the park land beyond, and before Mr. Hildebrandt had guessed his intention Tom had darted away, and was lost in the darkness. Lost even to Cab, who sprang once or twice at the high fence before

realising the position that he had been summarily deserted, and was alone in a strange land, when he sat down in the middle of the road and howled with anguish till the second cab arrived.

"Stop here," cried Mr. Hildebrandt in great excitement now; "he has jumped out of the cab and got into the park. I saw him! Don't follow the other cab any more, it's no use. Larry, you fool, wake up, and over the fence after him, whilst we drive round and round the park. Do you hear—damnation, get out!"

There was a struggling in the interior of the cab, and then spy No. 3, the ragged, bare-footed lad, who had been picked up somewhere on the road, and had fallen asleep by Mr. Hildebrandt's side, made an effort to quit the vehicle. Here Cabbage, stung by many insults, came in more handy than his master had bargained for, and resisted all egress from the cab; he plunged and barked at the two occupants, he described several wild circles round the vehicle, he eluded the lashing of the whip, he scared both spies back into their seats, and he wound up by frightening the horse, who rose on his hind legs and pawed the air—being an animal of considerable spirit—and nearly brought the whole equipage, by much backing and prancing, to an ignominious collapse. Meanwhile cabman No. 1 jogged quietly on his way, and his late fare began to breathe more freely in the loneliness and darkness of Cannon Hill Park.

CHAPTER VII.

ELMSLIE HOUSE.

OUR hero had still a tedious journey of some two miles before him; it was not easy to reach Hagley-road without a guide, and in the suburbs of Birmingham guides were scarce at that hour. He did not know his way, but it was satisfactory to feel for a while that he was free from spies and once more master of his actions. He was sorry for the loss of Cabbage, he was doubtful if his portmanteau would reach its destination, but both might be traced to-morrow, and it had been his one necessity to throw all impediments overboard in his effort to escape. At all events he was free for the present, and not a living soul knew where he was. He would go to Hagley-road despite this conviction; it would be a better starting-point, and if he were deceiving himself, and was still being watched, no great harm could ensue. If Miss Hildebrandt had been exposed to any greater danger since her telegram, she would have made her way to Hagley-road also, according to his instructions—strange if he should find her there, after all.

Tom went at a right angle across the park,

as well as he could in the darkness; and as soon as the boundary was reached he paused again and listened. When he was thoroughly assured there was no life or movement beyond, he vaulted lightly into the roadway, and turned again towards the town. After a fugitive glimpse of dark country he was soon lost in a maze of roads, with mansions of imposing exterior to right and left of him; but he went on with philosophic indifference to locality, and with a sharp look-out for the first pedestrian whom he might encounter. The hour was very late—what would they say at Elmslie House, when he discovered the residence of the Olivers, and roused the establishment with his demand for admission? He was not expected; he did not know the Olivers, he could only remember the *fiancée* of his brother as a gawky, half-grown girl. What a heap of explanations he should have to make through a key-hole to a sleepy servant before he would be allowed to enter the house.

In a big broad road, and at the corner of a cross turning, he came to a full stop; there was a rushing, plunging sound behind him, and he was at a loss to account for it, until, with a whirlwind kind of dash, Cabbage, who had seen him in the far distance, arrived once more upon the scene in breathless haste.

“Down, Cab, and hold your row,” was Tom’s inelegant and quick admonition; then Tom patted the dog’s side, and was glad of the company of his old friend again. There was no one follow-

ing, no sign of human life, no sound of the approach of the enemy, and our hero and his dog proceeded on their way in peace.

Presently a policeman under a lamp-post loomed upon the scene, and Tom went up to him, asked his way to Hagley-road, and found that he had not gone very far out of the right direction. When the place was finally reached, he thought he was not far from rest for a short while—not for long, as there was much to do, and he was a man who could not sit idle with the shadow of uncertainty upon him.

A hundred yards along Hagley-road, and a fruitless inspection of the names on various gateposts, and then a sudden sign of life and light and action in a large mansion standing in its own grounds. It was an evening party, in the full vigour of its after-supper dances, and the music and the ripple of pleasant laughter welled from open windows into the May night as Tom approached. There was a long string of carriages in the roadway, with lamps blazing athwart the darkness, and the coachmen were discussing the affairs of their employers from their boxes, or on the kerbstone, after the custom of the country.

"Which is Elmslie House?" inquired Tom of the first man he approached, "Mr. Oliver's?"

"Why, this is it," was the answer.

"This place—where the party is?"

"Yes."

"Oh," said Tom. "Well, here is one difficulty

surmounted. I shall not have to wake any one up."

He turned into the carriage drive, and went towards the mansion, every window of which was bright with light. They were playing Gounod's waltz from "Faust" as he approached, and it jarred upon his meditations. This seemed no time for the frivolities of life to him. His father was lying ill at Broadlands, there was much mystery before him, and a woman was in danger, counting every minute before the power was in his hand to rescue her. It did not seem a time for party-giving, and these Olivers were to be allied to the Dagnells, and might have had a little more consideration whilst Marcus was a guest in their house.

Tush! he was morbid and aggrieved, and with an unfulfilled purpose in his mind, or he would not be so querulous and critical to-night. Besides, he had been hunted and watched like a thief, and he had had to fly like a thief too. The contemplation of all this was unpleasant, and he was possibly tired and cross as he and his dog went up the broad front steps. He knocked loudly at the door, for there was a hum of merry voices within, and the guests, who had filled all the rooms, had overflowed into the big hall, where they were talking, laughing, and flirting in true evening-party fashion. When the door was opened by a servant in a livery gorgeous enough for Royalty itself, the scene was pretty and picturesque, even to its outskirts. There were dan-

dies in full dress, and ladies in all the glory of bright colours, standing about the hall, and fluttering to and fro from one room to another, sitting even up the broad stairs beyond.

"What's your business, young man?" asked the footman, surlily, for he was tired and cross too, and had not participated in any, of the fun.

"This is Mr. Oliver's?"

"Yes, it is."

Tom was travel-stained and generally soiled, and it was evident to the official eye that he was not a guest who had come in at the death.

"Very good. Then tell Mr. Dagnell his brother wishes to speak to him, and look sharp about it," said Tom, more peremptorily.

"Ay, I—yes, sir," said the servant, a little dismayed now. "Won't you—will you—well, I don't know where to put you, just this minute."

"I will wait here," said Tom.

"Mr. Dagnell, I think you said—the gent as is a-staying here you mean, and who——"

"Yes, be quick."

"I think I know where to find him," said the footman.

He had not closed the door, and Tom's position was not particularly enviable, standing on the threshold holding a big dog by the collar, and with many inquiring eyes turned in his direction. The ordeal did not last very long, for from the room on the left of the entrance the footman re-appeared, followed by Marcus, open-mouthed, open-eyed too, and staring.

"Good gad, Tom, what is it? Is it all up with the governor, is it— Oh! damn it, Tom, here's a beastly mess!" and Marcus forgot all his anxiety as to the motive for his brother's presence at Birmingham, in the awful fact that Cabbage had recognised him, broken away from his brother's grasp, and, amidst the most vociferous barking, had sprung forward and planted his two paws in the very centre of Marcus's shirt front, where he had printed off, in Birmingham mud, a fine *fac-simile*.

"Down, you wretched brute," cried Marcus, slapping the dog's head with his white kids. "What on earth, Tom, made you think of bringing the monster here? Just look what a state I am in!"

And Marcus was in "a state," certainly, Cabbage having been very glad to see him.

"Never mind," said Tom—"where's your room? I wish to speak to you, at once. Time is of moment to me."

"Ye-es—exactly—I suppose so," said Marcus, falling into his natural drawl now that his temporary excitement was over; "but hadn't we better shut the dog out in the front?"

"Yes, he will not run away," said Tom, following his brother's advice, an act which elicited a renewed protest from Cabbage, who lay forthwith across a large mat under the portico, and whined piteously, during the whole term of his banishment.

"Now then, we'll go upstairs, Tom. If you

will allow me, ladies and gentlemen," Marcus said to the bevy of curious fair ones and their attendant cavaliers, who were seated upon the stairs. "Thank you very much. Well—I am in a disgusting state," he said again, looking dismally down at his shirt front.

He led the way to the first floor, and along a corridor blazing with many lamps, to a room at the extremity, which he entered.

"Come in, Tom, here's my diggings. Perhaps you don't mind shutting the door behind you. Thanks."

Tom followed his brother into a handsomely furnished bedroom, with a dressing-room beyond, into which Marcus immediately retreated.

"I shan't be very long," he drawled forth from the inner apartment, "but it will save time if you tell me the news whilst I change my shirt. Upon my honour, Tom, you are an extraordinary fellow to bring that beastly dog to an evening party, mind you."

"I did not bring Cabbage to the party,—he received no invitation," said Tom, curtly.

"Didn't he, though? I mean, didn't you, though? I know they talked of asking you, there was a lot of talk about it, but I said you wouldn't care about anything of the sort," called Marcus from the inner room.

"And not at this time, certainly," added Tom; "no, I haven't come to the party. It is by a mere chance that I am in this house to-night."

"Ah, yes, of course, it must be. You would

have telegraphed again, if you had meant to come down. Well, I hope nothing is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong at home. Something may be very wrong at Birmingham," said Tom.

"Eh, what? There now, upon my soul, Tom, you shouldn't let out things so suddenly. I've dropped one of my diamond studs."

"I'll wait till you find it," said Tom, seating himself.

"Tha-anks," answered the voice, at a lower level, Marcus being evidently on his hands and knees; "it can't be very far off, but I may as well find it first. I really don't see it anywhere."

"No matter."

"No matter! Well, that is ridiculous, as if I'm going downstairs with one of my studs out of my shirt. Do you mind ringing the bell, Tom?"

"What for?"

"I really must have somebody to help me look for it. I shouldn't like to—oh! here it is."

The stud was discovered, but Tom touched the bell just the same.

"Is that you ringing, Tom?"

"Yes; tell the party who answers the bell to bring up a little refreshment, Marcus—I have had nothing since the afternoon."

"But, you will come down and——"

"What, in this costume?" cried Tom—"to astonish your friends, too. Oh! no—I am not here by invitation, but by accident. I may crave the hospitality of the Olivers later on—early to-mor-

row, perhaps—and for a friend of mine, hardly for myself. I may tell you the whole story to-morrow—not to-night. There is no time, and I am keeping you from the dance—or I may not tell you at all. It depends upon another's wishes."

"Indeed—no—yes," said Marcus, very much confused by his brother's hurried attempt at explanation. "I don't make out what you are driving at—it can't be about the telegram, of course not; but we'll leave it till to-morrow, as you say. Parker," he said to a servant who knocked, and came in at his request, "bring up some sherry and a few fowls—and a few sandwiches and things, for my brother here—and if you see Miss Oliver, tell her I'll be down in a minute."

"Yes, sir."

Exit Parker, and enter Marcus from the dressing-room with a clothes-brush in his hand.

"That dog has actually smothered me with mud, Tom," said Marcus. "Did he get behind me at all, do you know?"

Tom glanced at his brother's back as he turned.

"You're all right, Marcus," Tom said; "you must not be distressed about this."

"I never said I was distressed, but a fellow doesn't want to walk into a ball-room like a confounded mudlark," said Marcus. "And how are they all at home? Jolly, I hope."

"Oh, very jolly—with the exception of the governor," was the reply.

"Ah, yes, the governor, of course," said

Marcus. "You'll excuse my being a little foggy, Tom, but I really have not got over my surprise yet. I have not, indeed—I am afraid I am rather stupid just now."

"I'm afraid you are," replied Tom, bluntly; "but I will not add further to your confusion."

"We had a capital supper—a wonderful supper—and I may have had three or four glasses of champagne. I don't feel any the worse, and I walk straight. But," he added, "*I am* confused. I don't seem to understand what has brought you down here, Tom. I don't, indeed. Haven't you——"

"I will tell you to-morrow," said Tom, interrupting him.

"Tha-anks, but here's the sherry and things," he added, as Parker brought in the refreshments and some sandwiches; "and I fancy that I will leave you now for a little while."

"Not yet. Wait an instant."

"Certainly. I'm in no great hurry; you will not be very long, I daresay"; and Marcus sat down opposite his brother.

Tom disposed rapidly of two glasses of sherry and the same number of sandwiches, and then rose.

"I am ready. Let us see after Cabbage."

"By Jove! yes. I forgot Cabbage," said Marcus.

"In this big house, is there not a second staircase for the servants?" asked Tom.

"Oh! yes."

"Lead the way down then, and I can escape the guests."

"Just as you like, but——"

"Look sharp, Marcus. You don't know what lies before me to-night."

"What is it?"

"I will not trouble you now."

"Tha-anks," said Marcus—"you can tell me all to-morrow. I shall be glad to get down to Fanny—there's a confounded ass of a wholesale gunmaker, Tom, who is a deuced sight too attentive to Fanny, and I don't like it much."

"Nor Fanny either, I hope," said Tom in reply.

"Well, she's obliged to be civil, you see—but, of course, she does not like it any more than I do."

"Ah! of course," replied Tom, absently; "lead on, Marcus. I shall be glad to get away from here."

Marcus, thus adjured, led the way by the servants' staircase into the servants' hall, where they caused as much consternation as though they had been arrivals from the other world. For the domestics, elated by the soirée, or by the wine which had been left after the soirée, were holding a small carnival of their own below stairs, and had asked in not a few of the coachmen and footmen who should have been in attendance on their employers' horses and carriages in the front road. There was a little dancing, and some rough romping, kissing, and

suppressed screaming, until the brothers appeared suddenly in their midst, when an awful silence and general sheepfacedness ensued.

"Beg pardon; sorry to interrupt you all," said Marcus, very politely. "Shan't detain you more than a minute, but my friend thought he would like to come round this way for a change. I say, Parker, which of these doors leads into the stable-yard?"

"This one, sir."

"Tha-anks, so it does. This way, Tom. You wait here, whilst I go round to the side-gate and whistle in that dog. No," he said, more gravely, "I'll wait here, and you whistle him in. It won't do to be jumped at all over again, will it?"

Tom passed into the stable-yard, opened the side-gate, and called his dog, who the instant afterwards was bounding about the legs of our hero with an energy that no fatigue seemed able to repress.

Tom opened one of the stable-doors and shut him in. Marcus appeared the instant afterwards.

"I'm precious glad we're rid of him, Tom," he said. "I'll send somebody to feed him as soon as I can. Where are you going now?" he asked.

"What is beyond that door—the garden?"

"Yes—the garden."

"And beyond that?"

"I think there's a lane, or a back-street, or something."

"I am going out that way."

"Well, but——"

"It is not unlikely that I have been tracked to this house, and I wish to leave it unperceived."

"You—you haven't killed any fellow, I suppose?" said Marcus, thoughtfully. "We shall get into a devil of a row if you've done anything of that sort."

"It's not so bad as that," said Tom, dryly; "is there a door opening into the lane?"

"I think so. I am sure the dustman comes in that way, because I saw him whilst I was shaving at the window yesterday."

"Proof conclusive," Tom remarked.

"You'll excuse my walking down the garden in these boots?" said Marcus: "you can't miss your way if you keep to the path; and I haven't my hat either, and should catch an awful cold."

"I will excuse you."

"I shall sit up till you return, though," Marcus added; "for you've made me feel awfully nervous about you. Where are you going, I wonder?"

It began to dawn on the slow faculties of Marcus Dagnell that his brother was singular in his manner and graver than his wont.

"All explanations to-morrow," answered Tom.

"You'll lock the gate after you?"

"Yes, and throw the key over the wall again."

"Don't throw it with all your might, or you'll have it through old Oliver's pinery," said Marcus; "and, I say, if you don't find them at home,

or they're all in bed—wherever you are going, I mean—you'll make haste back, I daresay?"

"I daresay I may," said Tom. "Good night."

"Good night."

Tom disappeared from the stable-yard into the garden, and Marcus stood with his hands in the pockets of his black dress-trousers, reflecting on his brother's conduct. He was not a thoughtful man, but his brother's demeanour rendered him more thoughtful—even more considerate—than he was accustomed to be.

Tom was not half-way down the garden, which was darker and denser than he had expected, and the path more difficult to keep, when the apparition of his brother appeared again at his side—his brother, strangely metamorphosed, with a billycock hat and Ulster coat on, and a thick walking-stick clutched in his right hand.

"I'm not very quick, Tom—in fact, I'm deuced slow in many things—but I fancy you're going to have a row somewhere."

"Well?"

"Well, you're not going to have it all to yourself, that's all. I'll go with you."

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW SURPRISE.

THIS was the first exhibition of anything like interest in the affairs of other folk that Marcus Dagnell had been known to exhibit; life with him until this night had been a careful consideration of his own comfort, his own personal advantage, his own means to an end, and this step out of his limited circle of self was a considerable surprise to his brother. Marcus had existed more like a tortoise than a man—but there was a greater vitality in him than any one up to that night had given him credit for possessing.

Had the tender passion refined him, or had his brother's energy infected him at last?

"Do you really mean it, Marcus?" exclaimed Tom.

"Oh, yes, I have made up my mind about it."

"What will they say at the house?—what will Fanny Oliver say?"

"I have just mentioned it to Fanny. I told her everything I knew," said Marcus: "of course, there's nothing I know that Fanny doesn't know. There's perfect confidence between us."

"Just as there should be," replied Tom, as they walked on, "but what have you said to Miss Oliver?"

"Well, that you've run down to spend a few days with us without being asked, and that sort of thing," said Marcus, slowly; "and that you're in a deuce of a state of excitement about something or somebody, and you'll tell us all to-morrow when you have time."

"Anything else?" Tom inquired.

"Oh, she asked a terrible lot of questions. I can't remember all I said, except that you were in a hurry to get out of the house, because you had a call to make on somebody who keeps dreadfully late hours, and that you had been watched to this place, and you wanted to get away again over the back wall—through the back gate I mean."

"You should have left the explanation to me," said Tom; "it would have been a better plan."

"But you weren't there."

"And then you told Miss Oliver you should join me, in case I should be engaged in a dangerous expedition?" asked Tom.

"Exactly."

"Thank you, Marcus," said Tom, shaking him by the hand; "I feel as if I had one friend the more to-night. What did Fanny say to your proposition?"

"Oh, she begged me to go. She excused me all my dances with her, and Slitherwick thought I had better join you too."

"Who's Slitherwick?" said Tom, frowning.

"That's the wholesale gunsmith, or torpedo maker, or something in the firework line."

"The gentleman who pays Fanny Oliver a little attention?"

"A great deal of attention, I consider," said Marcus.

"Why did you let him know anything of this?" asked Tom.

"I couldn't help it. He was sitting by the side of Fanny when I told her I was going for a stroll."

"A stroll!"

"Yes, I said a stroll, to keep it dark a bit," replied Marcus; "but she guessed, at once, something was the matter. That girl, Tom, is as sharp as any number of needles you can mention. She's a wonderful girl."

"I daresay it seemed an odd time to choose for a stroll into Birmingham," Tom remarked; "but setting all this aside: you must go back, Marcus."

They were standing at the extremity of the garden now, which closed with a high brick wall, in which was set a wooden door.

"No, I shan't go back," said Marcus, doggedly: "I should look a precious fool to go back, after all."

"They will attach too much importance to the whole affair, and we shall become the talk of the town," said Tom.

"Slitherwick will think I was afraid. No, that will not do," said Marcus.

"I am not likely to encounter any danger, or to face the Forty Thieves, Marcus," said Tom, with his hand upon the door: "I am going to call upon a friend in distress, that is all."

"Will not her distress keep till the morning, Tom?" asked Marcus; "why is she in such a hurry to see you?"

"That is the little mystery which only an interview can solve."

"What does Ursula say?"

"She thinks it may be a distress for rent."

"Does she though? That's rather hard on you, isn't it?"

"Ursula was vexed when she said it—sorry afterwards that she had said it—but she is not troubled about the danger. Why should you be?"

"I don't know. You look so precious grim and fierce."

"A long journey from Littlehampton has fatigued me, that's all," said Tom in explanation, "and now, Marcus, you must go back, old fellow, and with my gratitude, too, for offering to join me. You cannot do any good, and may do harm. I have no permission to bring a second friend. I have no fear of danger, and your return will allay the fears of Miss Oliver, and checkmate Slitherwick, who wants Miss Oliver all to himself."

Marcus began to waver. "If you really think I shan't be of the least assistance, I——"

"I'm sure you will not."

"Can I leave you this stick?—it's a capital

stick," said Marcus, proffering the weapon; "look at the knob."

"My vacant old boy," said Tom, resting his hands upon his brother's shoulder and lightly shaking him, "haven't I told you I am not going to a fight? I have a call to make on Miss Hildebrandt."

"Who!" exclaimed Marcus, "what's her name?"

"Hildebrandt. I telegraphed to you about her. Do you really know any one of that name, then?"

"A girl with dark eyes—deuced pretty girl—who plays the piano just as if she was part of it—is that the girl, Tom?"

"She may play, I cannot tell," replied Tom, with some excitement; "but do you know her?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Then why the devil"—Tom burst into a rage here—"did you not answer my telegram, this afternoon?"

"I forgot all about the telegram, because, you see, I didn't know her and hadn't seen her when you telegraphed. She hasn't been here very long—only about an hour and a half."

"Here!" shouted Tom—"Miss Hildebrandt here?"

"Yes, if she hasn't gone away again—I'm sure she is here."

"Has she not mentioned my name?"

"I have not spoken to her myself."

"Didn't it enter into your thick head, Marcus, that this might be the reason of my visit to Birmingham?"

"No, it didn't. I knew I had something to tell you—but you put it out of my 'thick head,' till just this instant."

"Come back to the house," said our hero, seizing his brother's arm and walking with him at so sharp a pace that Marcus had to break into a run to keep up—"the expedition is abandoned, and she's safe."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. OLIVER'S PARTY.

MARCUS DAGNELL'S apathy, or natural want of perceptive power, had nearly sent his brother on a fruitless search, but there was something to be urged in excuse for his dulness. He urged it himself also, as if anxious to show that he had not intentionally neglected his brother's interest. Tom had confused and interrupted him in the room upstairs, and if Tom had been cooler and clearer, he, Marcus, would have been more ready to understand the position, and been cooler and clearer too. And although Miss Hildebrandt had arrived two hours ago with a lady *chaperon*, Marcus Dagnell had not heard her name mentioned till within the last half-hour, and that after she had been pressed to play by the lady who had introduced her to the party. Even then he had not associated the guest with the lady of whom Tom had inquired by telegraph, Fanny Oliver being on his mind, and Slitherwick continually hovering around him and Fanny, like the evil genius of the night.

"I should have thought more about it, Tom,

if Miss Hildebrandt had mentioned your name," said Marcus.

"She has not told any one that she has come at my suggestion?" inquired his brother.

"At your suggestion!" exclaimed Marcus. "Certainly not. Mrs. Damper asked permission to bring her friend, and here she is. Mrs. Damper is a great friend of Mrs. Oliver's, you see—great passion for music, and all that—and Miss Hildebrandt is first-rate, and no mistake."

"And she has been playing?"

"She has, indeed."

"Enjoying the party, in fact?"

"I should say so—all girls like evening parties—which are awfully jolly things sometimes, when——"

"When there is no Slitherwick, eh, Marcus?"

"I'm not afraid of Slitherwick, Tom, positively. I'm a better man than he is any day, I should think," said Marcus. "I don't consider that a man who makes guns——"

"There, that will do, Marcus," cried Tom: "now for the next moves on the chess-board."

"You're not going to play chess at this time of night, surely," said the prosaic Marcus, "and there's nobody to play with that I know of."

"Are you duller than usual, or am I more muddy?" muttered Tom, half to himself. "Here, old fellow, let us proceed quietly to business. Have you a second dress-suit upstairs?"

"Yes."

"You're taller than I, but the suit will do for

once," said Tom: "I am coming to this party, late as it is."

"I'm glad of that—they'll all be glad. Fanny and the Olivers, I mean."

"Yes, yes, I am not afraid of the warmth of their hospitality," said Tom. "Will you break the news to the host and hostess that your brother has arrived?"

"All right. Anything more?"

"Nothing more, save that we'll return to your room by the back staircase and prepare for action," said Tom; "lead the way."

Marcus led the way into the servants' hall, where the same riotous fun was proceeding, and where Marcus apologised for the intrusion in the same grave manner, and to the same surprised crowd of domestics, who thought he must be doing it on purpose, or to oblige Mr. and Mrs. Oliver by keeping an eye on them; and then the brothers went softly upstairs, and Marcus found a dress-suit for his brother, and put himself once more into company-trim.

"I'll go and prepare them," said Marcus; "you won't be long."

"No. Very soon."

"They're a jolly lot of people in Birmingham: you'll wish you had come earlier," said Marcus.

"I haven't come for jollity," was the half-sad reply, "and I am as much in disguise now, as when I stepped into the house."

Marcus stared at his brother, but he did not

demand any further explanations; he did not catch ideas readily, and he was in no mood to attempt to catch them. It would all come right presently, he had not the least doubt; he had played a waiting race all his life, and found it answer. There was nothing to excite him particularly; there had never been anything greatly to excite him; he could wish that Tom would take the affairs of life with as great composure as himself. Tom was always at fever heat, and much good it seemed to do him, thought Marcus ironically.

Marcus went downstairs, and presently Tom followed him, conscious that his trousers were a trifle too long, and his coat a trifle too tight across the shoulders. He presented a fair front to society, however, and was likely to pass critical inspection at that hour of the morning.

They were keeping it up late at the Olivers, but they were late folk, and did not have a party every day. This was a grand occasion that had been looked forward to by the numerous friends and relations of the Olivers, and though many of the guests had gone home, still there was a fair proportion left, and the spacious rooms were far from empty.

The daylight, clear and blue, and a little ghastly by contrast with the lights, shone through the staircase windows and over the hall door as Tom descended, but the rooms themselves preserved their party aspect, and thick curtains and closed

shutters concealed the protest of the morning against the lateness of the dissipation. It was a hot, close atmosphere into which Tom Dagnell was plunged in this strange fashion, and it was with a dull, dead weight about his heart that he found himself one of the guests, mixing, as it were, in the revelry, against which he had mentally protested in Marcus's room only a short time before. Still this was duty, not pleasure; he had not come for pleasure, Heaven knows: but for what solid reason he was present he was glad he was not called upon to declare at that hour—still more glad, perhaps, that Ursula Dagnell was not at his side to ask him disagreeable questions.

There was no proceeding at once to the side of Miss Hildebrandt and dashing into the explanations which seemed necessary to account for her appearance—for his own. In a house of many rooms, all turned topsy-turvy to meet the exigencies of a large party, it was not easy to discover the one particular visitor of whom he was in search. There were ceremonies of presentation or re-presentation to go through also—not one of the Olivers did he know from Adam now.

Marcus was on the look-out for him, and so no time was lost. It was the lady to whom Marcus was engaged who was the first to welcome Tom to Elmslie House.

"Fanny, this is my brother," said Marcus. "You don't remember him, I daresay, but here

he is. Mr. Thomas Dagnell," he said more formally to Miss Oliver.

Miss Oliver was a young lady free from all formality—or one who did not see the necessity for formality with the brother of her accepted lover.

"How d'ye do," she said, quickly. "I am very glad to see you in Birmingham. You're late though—what a pity you couldn't get here earlier!"

She shook hands with a heartiness more suggestive of a masculine than feminine greeting, and looked at him with a pair of bright, unflinching blue eyes. She was a tall, well-developed young lady of some two or three and twenty years of age, clad in pink silk and white lace. This was the high-stepper, "the regular clipper," who had reduced the stony heart of Marcus Dagnell into softness, and elicited rapturous encomiums from his thin, pale lips. Tom would scarcely have set down Miss Oliver as a fitting match for his stolid brother, but love goes by contrasts sometimes, and probably it was the exuberance of spirits of the lady that had been the great charm to Marcus.

"It's so kind of you to honour us," she continued, effusively; "it's mamma's birthday too, and she will be so pleased to see you. Shall I take you to mamma and—papa?" she added, somewhat doubtfully.

"I shall have great pleasure in renewing my acquaintance with them," said Tom, offering her his arm, and inwardly praying that mamma and papa

were not far off. Miss Oliver led the way through the brilliantly lighted rooms, and the guests stared at Tom, and wondered what new figure this was stalking across the scene at so late an hour.

Tom glanced right and left of him as he proceeded, looking for the face which he had seen last at Littlehampton—the face of the woman in danger! It was before him at last in the second room—the ball-room—where a band of six musicians was playing a quadrille in a nerveless, sleepy fashion. She was seated by a door leading into a conservatory, from the roof of which several Chinese lanterns were glimmering, and a middle-aged gentleman was endeavouring to interest her by his powers of description of some place he had visited, or people he had known. He was gesticulatory and emphatic, and marked his periods by little dabs with his left fingers in the palm of his right hand, and Violet Hildebrandt sat a patient, but evidently a weary listener, with a far-away gaze in her dark eyes.

Tom was glad—he hardly knew why—that he had not found her dancing, singing, laughing, or at her ease in any way, though each phase of enjoyment might have been a mask for the deeper feelings by which she was depressed. This was as he had thought to find her, with the shadow of danger hovering about her young life, and with no defiance of it in her looks. He had not come to Birmingham in vain, and the peril which beset her was not to be easily thrust aside.

Violet Hildebrandt caught sight of our hero, and her whole countenance changed—there was a joyful recognition, and Tom's heart thrilled at the glad look on her face.

He bowed,—his eyes seemed to say, "I shall be back quickly, wait for me," and she returned his salutation, and appeared to read his meaning correctly.

"You know Miss Hildebrandt?" said Fanny Oliver, surprised.

"Yes, did not Marcus tell you?" Tom replied.

"Not that you knew Miss Hildebrandt. Ah, what a charming young lady, how amiable, how talented—tell me how long you have known her, please? I am desperately in love with her," she ran on, rapturously: "she is a sweet creature, is she not?"

"You have known her a long time, I presume," said Tom.

"Only this evening," answered Fanny Oliver. "Mrs. Damper was kind enough to afford us a sight of her to-night for the first time. Wasn't it good of her, Mr. Dagnell? Was it not really kind of her? And we are all naturally proud of a celebrity, you know."

Tom did not know, did not understand, but he bowed his head in assent, and ventured no remark.

"I am afraid Mr. and Mrs. Oliver are busy with their friends just now," he said; "perhaps in half an hour or so——"

"Oh! no, they would never forgive me if I were not to introduce you at once. Here is mamma, at any rate. Mamma," to a very stout, very short, comely old lady in sea-green satin, "here is Mr. Thomas Dagnell, a late but none the less welcome guest."

"Bless my soul! yes, you are late," said Mrs. Oliver, in a fat chuckling voice, which exactly corresponded with her general appearance. "I hope you're well, sir. You're not a bit like your brother,—I remember you when you were a little boy; won't you sit down?"

And Mrs. Oliver made room beside her by a vigorous clutch to her sea-green skirt. Tom was "landed."

He sat down—and a tall wisp of a man, with a club beard and a galvanic smile, rose before them as from an unseen trap, and swept away Miss Oliver at once. This was Slitherwick, as Tom learned afterwards.

It was a painful ordeal of the next quarter of an hour for our hero. He wished to be away, to be free to speak to her of whom he had come in search, and in lieu thereof, he was chained to the side of a fat old lady in sea-green. An estimable soul, doubtless, full of amiability, and not lacking in conversational powers—only the conversation was about the size of her house, the number of her rooms, and the social status of her guests—but a very incubus to Tom at that time. And when the

chance of an escape seemed to present itself, and a portly gentleman was taking a quiet adieu of the hostess, and whispering in her jewelled ear that he really had very much enjoyed the evening, and so thanked her for himself and daughters, and Tom had half-risen to slip away, here was papa Oliver being brought in tow by Marcus!

This was an effusive family altogether, thought Tom. They all rippled over with bland smiles and warm sentiments, but Tom was excited and irritable, and felt as if he should be glad to quarrel with one or two of them. Why should they rejoice to see him?—why couldn't they let him be till the morning, and not lump down upon him in this way with their amiable patronage?

Mr. Oliver was a big man, with a big, round, pasty face, framed in sandy whiskers. The smile was monstrous with which he greeted our hero, and the grip of his huge white hand was of the heartiest and most bone-crushing character.

"Extremely glad to see you," he said. "A brother of Marco's—I always call him Marco—is like a son of my own. It's a long time since I've caught sight of you—been sowing wild oats abroad, I hear—ha! ha!—Master Tom, the crop all reaped at last, I hope? I sowed mine early—much the best plan, if you've got any in stock. How's your father—how's my old friend, Sir John?" he roared forth.

It was as well that the guests should know that there was a titled friend of Mr. Oliver somewhere in the background.

"Sir John is not any better, I fear," answered Tom.

"Oh!—ah! he is very ill—yes," said Mr. Oliver, suddenly remembering the knight's ailments. "He was a strong man when I saw him last. What a temper he had, too! and how proud he was! Good gracious! I couldn't hold a candle to him then. He got on, and I kept in the shade till I came to Birmingham, when I got on too. Not by brains, though," he added, confidentially, and with a sudden nudge in Tom's side, "but by sheer pluck, hard work, and keeping my shoulder to the wheel. You'll come over the factory to-morrow? A thousand hands, sir, a good thousand hands, all happy and contented; for I treat them well, remembering I was not much better off myself once. Are you fond of pictures? That's a real Turner, over your head, Mr. Dagnell."

Tom glanced at the real Turner for a moment, and then focussed Marcus with his gaze.

"Can't you take this talkative wretch away?" Tom's eyes said very plainly, and Marcus understood him very plainly too, but did not see his way to the process.

"And if you are fond of old china, I think, Marcus," here Marcus was summarily digged in the left side, "we can show your brother a bit or two of the real thing in the morning, eh? I daresay, Master Tom, you wouldn't guess within a thousand what I spent in Old Chelsea last year! Did I tell you, Marcus?"

"Well, really, now you mention it, I think you

did," replied the polite Marcus. "But I've quite forgotten what it was; thirteen pounds, or thirteen thousand, wasn't it?"

"Nearer the last," said Mr. Oliver, "not far short of the last. I'm too extravagant, Fanny says, but I live for Hart, sir! I love Hart!"

"Is he in the china way, too?" asked Marcus, in perfect innocence, until he was taken aback by a second unceremonious dig in the ribs, this time delivered with so much energy that the recipient curled up with pain.

"Ha, ha! That's your brother's satire, sir," Mr. Oliver said to Tom: "he's a sarcastic rogue, and is always ready to have his fling at the old man. I said 'Hart,' certainly—but it's too late to think about one's 'h's'—and you needn't have been down upon me so quickly, Marco. I'm no scholar—I'm self-taught—I don't profess to be more than I am—a simple tradesman—a Birmingham manufacturer—that's all, sir. But I pay my way, and I can stand pretty well the chaff of my friends, especially this friend, of course."

He attempted another lunge with his hard finger in the direction of his future son-in-law's left side; but on this occasion Marcus stepped with unusual alacrity away from him. Tom wondered if Mr. Oliver were always like this, and if so, how his family had survived it; but the set, complacent smile upon a full white face suggested wine at supper, and probably wine after supper.

"There are one or two friends of mine, Master

Tom, I should like to introduce you to before they go," said Mr. Oliver: "there's Bunnett, of the Glass Bead Works—you've heard of Bunnett's glass beads?—a charming man, and worth three quarters of a million, sir, if he's worth a half-penny—and Nibbs, of the Screw Steel Pen—you've heard of Nibbs?"

Tom made a stand at last, he drew the line at Mr. Oliver. Bunnett and Nibbs were not for his acquaintance on that evening, he would die first!

"I have not heard of these great men yet. I shall be delighted, Mr. Oliver, to know them some other time. Unfortunately I am engaged for the next hornpipe—waltz—or something with Miss Hildebrandt. You will excuse me for the present—the ladies, sir, the ladies." And Tom, confused and excited, dashed away from his host, and left him to the companionship of his brother.

"A nice fellow," said Mr. Oliver, looking after him, "but a precious sight too fly away. What did he say about a pipe? Good God! he mustn't smoke in the ball-room."

"I fancy he said hornpipe," remarked Marcus: "that was his humour, of course."

"I hope so. I should be sorry for any of my guests to forget he was in a gentleman's house," said Mr. Oliver, with a sudden cessation of his broad smile.

"You need not be afraid that my brother will be anything but a gentleman," said Marcus, very frigidly.

"No, no, I don't think so," said Mr. Oliver. "Only I couldn't make him out all at once."

"That's very likely. I never could," said Marcus.

"And he's been abroad, knocking about amongst foreigners, and I hate foreigners and their nasty habits," said Mr. Oliver; "and he *is* fly away. Do you think a little more champagne will do us any harm, Marco?" he added.

"I am engaged to Fanny for the next dance," said Marcus, looking at his programme of pink and gold, with gold emblazonments, and the Oliver crest and "Elmslie House" thereon.

"Oh, never mind that. Slitherwick will look after her."

"Yes, that's just what I am thinking about," said Marcus, coolly sauntering away from Mr. Oliver forthwith.

The manufacturer stared after him, then sat down by the side of his wife, and planted one big hand on each knee.

"The Dagnells are giving themselves airs this evening," he muttered, with the smile still quenched from his broad visage: "they're not everybody, because they're sons of a seedy old city knight, whom I could buy up over and over again."

"They are both very nice young men," said Mrs. Oliver. "Ain't you well?"

"Oh! I'm well enough, but I feel as if I had been snubbed in my own house somehow."

"Nobody wants to snub you, Jonathan," said

his easy-tempered wife, "and I am sure everybody has enjoyed the party very much."

"So they ought. It cost a sight of money."

"Yes, anybody can see that. We haven't been sparing of the outlay. I wonder what Mr. Nibbs thinks of it?"

"Ah! and Bunnett and young Slitherwick. Ain't you thirsty?"

"No, Jonathan."

"I am, dreadful"; and Mr. Oliver slowly rose and went his way once more, this time in the direction of the refreshment-room.

Meanwhile, Tom Dagnell went in search of Violet Hildebrandt. She had changed her position since he had caught sight of her, a short while since, and there were only strange faces staring back at him as curiously as he stared at them. Had she gone away—vanished once more from him—a dream figure in the dream-like life that had come to him since he had stepped on English ground with her? He passed through a suite of spacious rooms without perceiving her, and the stern expression on his face gave rise to more than one remark as he wandered on in search.

"Who is he?"

"That is Marcus Dagnell's brother, the man who ran away from home, five years ago"—

"A strange story or two they tell of him down in Sussex," were the remarks of the masculine members of the community, who had

gleaned a faint knowledge of the Dagnells from Mr. Oliver's garrulity.

"What a cross-looking man!" said one lady; "is he going to kill his partner when he finds her?"

Tom went on, deaf to these comments, one or two of which reached his ears; the guests talking in loud tones, as guests will after supper, when much champagne has been drunk and many speeches have been made.

Marcus was dancing quadrilles with Miss Oliver; and Mr. Slitherwick and a bony virgin of thirty were *vis-à-vis*; and there were many bright smiles—malevolent folks might have said "leers"—between the gun-maker and Marcus's *fiancée*, as Tom passed.

There was presently an opportunity to ask a question of Marcus, whilst the side couples were figuring in the centre, and Tom touched his brother's arm.

"Hollo! coming to dance?" said Marcus.

"Where is Miss Hildebrandt?" Tom asked, in a hoarse voice; "I have made the circuit of these infernal rooms, and she is not here."

"Gone home, perhaps," said Marcus, coolly; "a good many are on the move now."

Miss Oliver, a watchful young lady in her way, supplied Tom with information more satisfactory. She had heard Tom's inquiry, being already curious concerning our hero's sudden appearance in Birmingham, and his previous knowledge of Miss Hildebrandt.

"You are asking for Miss Hildebrandt, Mr. Dagnell," she said: "I think you will find her in the conservatory."

Tom thanked her, and hastened away. He had forgotten the conservatory, and was unprepared for its extent when he passed from the room, and found himself in a miniature Crystal Palace, where two fountains were plashing gracefully amidst a little forest of foliage. A stray couple or two were wandering about and discoursing eloquently, and love and jealousy were not unrepresented on the bronzed garden-seats which were there. And sitting alone, waiting for him, under the cool green shelter of some climbing plants, was Violet Hildebrandt. She knew that there was much to say to which there should be no listener but Tom Dagnell, and she had stolen hither for the interview. Her face seemed to grow paler, and her dark eyes to dilate as he advanced. It was a crisis in both lives to which they were advancing.—Yes, it was like fate!

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

"You are asking for Miss Fiddler's
signature," she said: "I think you will find her in
the conservatory."
Tom thanked her, and hastened away. He
had forgotten the conservatory, and was much
puzzled for its extent when he passed from the
room, and found himself in a miniature Crystal
Palace. There were two fountains with flashing jets,
and amidst a little forest of foliage. A young
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cussing eloquently, and love and jealousy
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chitectural which were there. And sitting alone
writing down him, under the great green shelter
of some climbing plants, was Fiddler Fiddle-
head. She knew that there was much to
do to which she should be no listener, but
Tom Fiddler, and she had stolen him for the
moment. Her face seemed to grow paler, and
her dark eyes to dilate as he advanced. It was
a crisis in both lives to which they were
confronted. Yes, it was the first time.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME

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